

Vale of Tears
by
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I only have ten Christmases left.

Only ten lonely eves left; I am fifty years old and taking into consideration my lifestyle and my family's history of health problems I'll probably be dead by the winter of my sixtieth year. The winter of 2017; that is, of course, if the world does not end on December 21st, 2012. This is the date prophesied by the Mayans that the earth will die. This date is also the day of my birth... Happy Birthday!

This gives me the maximum of five years to complete this novel, of course, that is if the world *does* end on December 21st, 2012; my birthday, but I don't think that it will. Either way I will have said all there is to be said from anyone by which the likes of me. By then I'll be fifty-five-years-old and old enough to die happily— This is my third attempt at the novel. This one in particular has gone through many name changes; first it was *Above Birds*, then *Santhymum*, then *Jeckling*, and now *Vale of Tears*, which I find most appropriate since I consider this a sad story, and according to the Mayans we are on a tight schedule.

I was a sufferer of the sixty page curse. On each manuscript, I only reach page sixty and then I froze up. I believe it was because I was trying to tell stories that were not my own. I created completely dead characters with no fire, no soul. A soulless character is a dead one. So the manuscripts died along with them. I did as most beginning writers do; I stole from other writers. I once heard a man say, "Literature criminals should be crucified!" and I asked him, "Well, how you expect anyone to learn anything?" A writer mimics others until he finds his or

her own voice. You create a stew of borrowed talents and then you find your place naturally. I created an acronym with the beginning letters of my favorite author's names: *Jeckling*

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I first met Jane outside of a café called The Iowa. I was there to do a poetry reading. She was there with her boyfriend and I was there with my then companion, Maureen. Seeing Jane was similar to having a bucket of water being thrown in your face. Her beauty was striking. She wore an old, torn tank-top and blue jeans that hugged her buttocks with unrelenting grip. It didn't take much for Jane to look good, in fact it took nothing at all. I was only introduced to her briefly before being carried inside to do the reading. There weren't many people there; in those days I was an unknown, just another poet in a cosmos of poets and poetesses.

I was able to appease the crowd for 30 or 40 minutes and then I called it quits. Afterward I went to the bar to have some drinks and a sandwich with potato chips. Maureen had run off somewhere. The bartender was a bald patriot with an American flag bandana tied around his scalp, and had thick, white arms with a vaccination scar on the left appendage. For children born in the late fifties and early sixties you needed to be vaccinated with a shot that left a circular scar. The year then was 1983 and the scar was still visible.

The crowd was buzzing. I sat alone, speaking with other poets who had read that night. As I finished my potato chips Jane took a seat next to me.

"Did you really get beaten with nails when you were a boy?" She asked. She was referring to one of my poems about when I was a child and another boy punched me in the face with nails between his knuckles.

“Yes.” I said. “You can not see the scars because of my beard.” She got a very sad look on her face when I told her this. Her eyes grew large and watery like two fish bowls. They still looked good, however. She put her hand next to mine. I looked at them. They were wonderful; long fingers and manicured nails, soft and kind and without a scratch. For me hands are very important. She began speaking to me about other things. She was an actress so she was very loud, projecting her voice over the noises of those around us. Maureen wasn’t much of anything, and to be perfectly honest, she was a very, very ugly woman. She could not help it, she was born ugly. There are many more ugly people in the world than beautiful ones, and Maureen was one of them. It wasn’t uncommon for her to run off at the beginning of one of my readings and not come home for three or four days. She was a free spirit, and I was no prison guard. I liked to think of her as a bird. She just flew in and out of my cuckoos nest whenever she felt like it. The nights when she was not there carried a strange duality for we spent most of our time either fighting or fucking and it was nice having the place to myself to write, but when I went to bed it became very lonesome and very dark in the house, there was no warmth.

I met Maureen a similar way that I met Jane, in a bar after a reading. I was always looking for readings. I hated doing them, but I saw no other way to get my name out. I was sending poems to publishers in the mail every week for two years straight and had heard nothing. At that time, Maureen spent most of her days with a very bohemian crowd, a lackluster bunch. I have no idea what she saw in me, maybe it was that I was terribly cruel to her friends blatantly, and she liked the fact that I was a misery case. Maureen had a terrible habit of wanting to fix things that could not be fixed. I was a project for her; her holy grail. She liked the wounded, and

I had been shot.

One of her friends told me that he had disproved Murphy's Law; the idea that everything will go wrong if only you give it the chance. He told me that all you must do is the opposite of what you were going to do, therefore cross-canceling the reaction. I humored him and agreed. All through the night with Maureen and her friends, I couldn't get over how big her ass was. She had a very big ass. The rest of her body was normally sized and then there was this backside that jetted out. Looking back, I'd say it was her own redeeming value. Like I said, her face was one of a clown. Her breasts resembled a golf ball in a tube-sock, and her legs were riddled with varicose veins. The only thing that Maureen said to me that night when I first met her was: "As a poet you are like the treasure chest of toys at a doctor's office, amusing to people who don't know any better."

I got into my car and drove home, and I didn't hear anything from her for almost a month. I did not like her, and I thought if I never saw her again that it would be too soon. I had almost completely forgotten about her when my next-door neighbor, Sal Howzerwitz, Jr., a Jew, and I were talking outside in the small, cement courtyard of our apartment complex. "I've got this woman now, Jack." he told me.

side note: My full name is Jonathon Cranick, Jr., but I go by Jack. Sal and I were both Juniors; he was a Polish Jew and I was a Italian Catholic by birth. Now we were both nothings.

Anyway, he told me, "You should see this ass on her." I knew who it was immediately... Sal thought I was completely crazy. He was not an artist. He was a philistine. He did not appreciate music, painting, and definitely not poetry. He was under the impression that poetry only consisted of...

Roses are red, Violets are blue, Sugar is sweet; And so are you

and so when I allowed him to read my poetry, not only did he not understand it, but he thought it was ludicrous, and that there no way any respectable publisher would consider releasing my work. “There is no beauty in that junk.” he told me, but I knew better.

One night there was a loud banging on the front door. “Who is it?” I said. “It’s Sal!” I heard the voice shout. “Hold on!” I shouted back. I had been writing in the nude and I was covered in blood for I had been plucking deep-rooted ingrown hairs out of my stomach and chest with cuticle scissors. I was very hairy, and if I did not pluck them they created gigantic, hard-headed zits all over my body. I covered myself with a bathrobe and opened the door. Maureen jumped in, ugly face, fat ass and all. She gave me a kiss on the right cheek and walked past me into the living area. The floor was covered with papers and the only light was from two soft, yellow bulbs, one in the corner of the room and the other over my typewriter next to the window. “Hello, buddy.” said Sal, “This is Maureen.”

“We’ve met.” She said, now taking a seat on the sofa.

Sal was surprised, “You have?” He asked.

“Yes.” She said, “I went to one of his readings some time ago.”

“Yes, I remember.” I said.

We shared a moment of silence while Maureen looked around the room. All I had in my apartment was the writing desk, complete with my typewriter and a stack of white paper, also a yellow legal pad of lined paper and two blue ballpoint pens. There was also the sofa, a bookshelf, and a reprint of the Wallis painting *The Death of Chatterton*.— Chatterton was a

writer who committed suicide when his work was rejected by publishers.

“You know, I’m a writer too.” she said. “I have a pen name, Janet Scott.”

“That’s a very good name.” I said.

“I know,” she said, “I chose it.”

I really hated her. Sal still sat in the doorway, completely excluded from the talk of poetry and

whatnot. He was a lawyer, with an office and a nameplate that read: *Sal Howzerwitz, Jr. Esq.*

I couldn’t figure out what a man like Sal was doing with a woman like Maureen.

“What name do you write under?” She asked me.

“Jack Cranick.” I said, “I never saw a need for Pseudonyms.”

That kind of rubbed her the wrong way, for she became very jaded. She could feel my coldness

toward her. I could almost see how that comment about Pseudonyms effected her. Her posture

became unanimously erect.

“Well,” she said, “I never liked the name Maureen.”

“I always thought it sounded like an ugly fruit.” I said.

Well, that did it. She stood up and pointed a finger at me.

“Fuck you!” she screamed. She folded her arms and stood with her huge bottom to one side.

“This is a terrible man, Sal.” She said, as if I weren’t there.

“You shouldn’t spend your time with such men!” She continued, “So rude to his guests!”

She took the typewriter from the desk and in one giant heave tossed it from my second story

window. The glass shattered into pieces with a crash and I could hear the typer land with a

ching ching. She grabbed her coat and Sal by the arm, she took one last look at me—

and she was gone.

3

I worked nights as the janitor in the office building for the publishing house *Crabapple Press*, in downtown Los Angeles. I figured if I couldn't get published by them, I might as well work for them, even if it's cleaning their toilets, be that as it may. I had discovered at an early age that rejection is as common and as resilient as the cockroach, the only creature able to survive the nuclear bomb; so I might as well become used to it. I punched in at the office building of *Crabapple Press* at 7:36 pm every night, and worked until 4:45 the next morning. I took the city's transit system, because I could not afford a car. I did most of my writing from 5 am to about noon. I liked having the mornings to write, because it was still dark and cool out. Late into the night there was cars moving or screams from the balconies, but at 5 in the morning it always got very quiet, and that faint redish-orange the sun made behind the

mountains looked good to me.

Los Angeles from afar is a beautiful city, but when in the midst of it, it can be a junkyard. I had lived there since I was seven-years-old. I moved with my family there from Youngstown, Ohio. The apartment I was living in then, the one Maureen had thrown my typewriter out the window, was an improvement from the one I originally moved into at the ripe old age of eighteen. I was completely petrified, and still a virgin at the time. The bathroom was shared and located down the hall next to a set of three telephones, all with bodily fluids near the ear and mouth pieces. When I woke up in the middle of the night and did not feel like walking down the hall I would just urinate out the window and into the drainpipe.

The woman who ran the apartment house back in 1975, when I was eighteen, was forty-five and still radiantly beautiful. Her name was Sheila. All I had to show for myself was a typewriter, one bag containing my clothes and a few choice belongings, and a copy of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *The Sirens of Titan*. Sheila was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen up to this point, and I was convinced she must have been one of the women belonging to Titan, one of Saturn's moons, which as described in the book held the most gorgeous women in the solar system. I was extremely nervous around women, for all I had done sexually was rub the outside of a girl's panties in the 5th grade and had been kissed a few times, all else was foreign to me.

Sheila led me to my room on the third floor of the apartment house, which was built like a layer cake, long, tall, and narrow. I had a room on the far east side, over looking a street that was often dead. She made the joke, since I told her I was a writer, that she would give me the quietest room so I could concentrate on my work. I did not know why she laughed when she told me this; it was because there were no quiet rooms in the whole place, and I suppose that it was

common knowledge that apartment houses were noisy. I did not know this, since I had lived in my parents home my entire eighteen years on this earth. I had a good laugh in bed though, when I listened to the footsteps of my neighbor upstairs, and the sailor on my right beating his girlfriend, while the neighbor to the left played Brahms on the radio.

I began work on my first novel in that room. That one only lived for three weeks and then I snuffed it. I really concentrated on poetry, which is the trade I would become semi-famous with. My very first book of poetry *Quitting Time* was completed 18 months later. It was universally rejected, but remember friends, the cockroach...

In that 18 months I got the job as the janitor at *Crabapple Press*. I had saved little money and I was running out of it quickly. I thought about Hamsun who ate his own flesh so he could write instead of work. I looked at my arm and tried to imagine it as a turkey leg, but it was no use.

The man's job I was taking at *Crabapple Press* was a very old man, who had done the job for well over thirty-five years. I couldn't conceive the possibility of cleaning toilets that long, but I wouldn't quit until 1983, eight years later. Anyway, the old man's name was John Clevermore. I told him that my name was John as well, and it was his idea, so that we wouldn't get it confused, I go by Jack and he remain John, since he had been going by John so much longer than I had. I agreed and I have been Jack ever since.

I liked John, he was the only man I ever knew who could make a job such as a shit cleaner a thing to be proud of. He took such pride in his work that I had to ask him, "What is so glorious about cleaning up other people's shit?" and he looked at me through his very, sagging, glazed eyes and said, "There is a job for every man. The fact that half of the world's

population couldn't do this job makes me special. It takes some man to be able to make clean the filth of other men."—

He was right.

I stayed in that apartment house, which was called the *Sunrise Inn*, for two years before finally being able to move into what I would call home until well into my forties. Sheila would bring me loaves of bread, jars of jam, apricot and pomegranate, apples, oranges, peanut butter, beef jerky, packs of cigarettes, and she would invite me down to her apartment for drinks. She also allowed me to pay late on the rent I owed her. Beside her beauty she was also kind.

One night she invited me to her place just to shoot the breeze. Her husband had been a general in the Vietnam War and was killed. I didn't go to the war, because by the time I was of age the war was over. It lasted from 1959 to that year, nineteen hundred and seventy five. Sixteen years. I was two when it started, and now I was a man, a surely dead man if I had been born one year earlier. Sheila's husband had died in the spring of 1966, so she spoke of him as a happy afterthought... So I joined her for drinks. She mixed the drinks and brought them over. She was very playful my nature and very sexy. Her breasts bounced up and down when she spoke. She had very tan skin that looked succulent. Before I knew what had happened she kissed me. I sat still. She kissed me again, dashing her tongue in and out of my mouth. She went over to the bed and told me to join her. She asked me if this was my first time and I told her it was. I walked over to the side of the bed, took off my trousers and socks. I left my shirt on, because I was ashamed of my body, which was fat and covered in hair. She didn't seem to mind that I left it on, so I climbed into bed and situated myself on top of her. She was very beautiful in the lamplight. She told me what to do and I did it. It felt good, very good.... I couldn't believe it was

happening—

I was making love to a Martian.

4

After that I would go to Sheila's and we'd make love. I soon fell in love with her.

She was very easy to fall in love with; a beautiful woman, especially since I received very little female attention as a young man. And now I thought I was hot shit, making love with an older woman, but the truth was, I wasn't. She never let on how terrible at love making I actually was.

She put on quite a show for me, and I think in an odd way she loved me too, although she told me that she would never be able to love anyone the way she loved her dead husband, General Joseph R. Golightly.

Eventually I moved in with her and did not have to pay rent. John Clevermore died of pneumonia three weeks after he officially retired from cleaning toilets at *Crabapple Press*.

A man who knows nothing but work, needs work to survive. His death was the first death that I felt sadness for. In some way I felt responsible, because if he kept working he would have still been alive. People drop like flies after they retire. Engraved on his gravestone it read:

See that my grave is kept clean—

Sheila and I were getting along famously. I told her that I loved her and she said it to me, although she loved me in a different way. She wasn't *in* love with me, but she did indeed love me with 100% of her heart. I wrote love poems for her, many of which I have lost over the years. I put them in a drawer and then I put them somewhere for safe keeping and I haven't seen them since, not that I would want them now anyway. I sometimes pretended that when she told me she loved me she really meant she was *in* love with me. I wanted it so badly to be so.

This went on for some time, five or six months and then I did my first poetry reading.

It was inside a bar three blocks from the apartment house. There were 26 people there, I remember counting, 26. I was so nervous that I vomited. I looked over the faces and Sheila was not there. I began to read, fumbling over my words. One man in the crowd yelled out to me, "You're terrible! Unlistenable! Get off the Stage!"

I shouted back, coated in my heartbroken drunkenness, "Fuck you, man! I'll kick your ass!"

Everyone quieted down and I began to read again. I never thought it would end. Minutes turned

into days it seemed. I ended with a, “That’s it.” and the crowd broke out into empathetic applause. Outside the man I had exchanged brutality with was waiting for me. He caught me with a right hand over my eye. I went down, he picked me back up. He punched me again, busting my nose. I tried to fight back, but I was too weak. I remember thinking, I hope he kills me. He punched me again and I fell to my knees. He fired three more, my face mangled, red, dripping plasma all over the alleyway. Finally he stopped and I slouched to one side, feeling the heat from my pulsating wounds. I don’t know how long I laid there, it felt like all night. The bartender found me out there bleeding to death three hours later. He called Sheila, because he knew I was staying at the *Sunrise Inn* and she came to take me home. She washed me off in the tub and then put me to bed. The next morning my eyes were swollen shut, my nose looked like a modern art masterpiece, completely destroyed. In time I healed, although my nose never quite looked the same again. It is now flat.

Tragedy struck soon after that. Sheila began drinking heavily and some nights would not come home. I sat up waiting for her many hours until I couldn’t wait any longer and I fell asleep. I had known her for almost two years and we had been romantically involved for one and three-quarter years. We became like two strangers bumping around in the same house. It came to a head on a night that it rained. She asked me to leave. She told me she had met someone and that she loved him. She had indeed found someone she could love as much as the late General Joseph R. Golightly. I felt like crying, as my heart filled up with cement, but I held it in. I said, “But I love you.”

She smiled softly and said, “My dear boy, I do not love you.”—

I found myself homeless and loveless in the same night. I wouldn't tell another person I loved them for ten years. I never saw Sheila again, and I believe she too is now dead.

Sal Howzerwitz Jr., Esq., my Jewish neighbor, also had a daughter named Loretta. She stayed with her mother most of the time and only came to visit Sal once or twice a year, so every time we saw her she was much bigger and very different. For some reason, and I'm not sure why, she took a liking to me. Sal was not much of a father, nor would I be, but I was good with Loretta. Maureen was practically living next to me since she spent most of her time at Sal's place, and I had yet to fix the window. The typewriter was a *Royal Quiet DeLuxe*, and was built like a brick shit-house, so the only damages done to it from the fall off my second story window were a few scratches, here and there. On one occasion Loretta came to visit and stayed for the entire Christmas week. Maureen was having get-togethers every night with her bohemian friends. They all did drugs, pills mostly, and they would have poetry readings, getting up on Sal's furniture and screaming at the top of their lungs god-awful rhymes. I could hear their muffled voices parading around beneath me, and I then understood why Maureen didn't like my poetry, it was nothing like hers. She proclaimed the freedom she felt when not shaving her vagina, that men were the oppressors and that a shaved twat was an imprisoned twat.

Sal, absolutely dumbfounded by all the commotion Maureen and her cronies were capable of, asked if Loretta could stay in my apartment until things settled down below. I said sure, since Loretta and I had hit it off so wonderfully. I was not used to having anyone in my house, especially a little one. I had nothing entertaining to do, except play hand games. My hands engulfed hers. I would close my eyes and she would make funny faces and I had to guess what they were. What she did not know was that I kept my eyes slightly open, and the fact that I could guess correctly the face she was making every time amazed her to tears of

laughter. We even spent Christmas together, due to Maureen's Christmas party. Any decoration that littered my house you can attribute to Loretta. She put silver garnish around all the doorknobs of the house and replaced a yellow light bulb with a red one. Christmas Eve was the only day I got off from the janitorial position at *Crabapple Press*, so I spent it with Loretta. She made me a gift out of an old sweat-sock from my dresser drawer. She put googly eyes on it, she drew a beard around the heel with magic-marker, and she pasted on a flat nose made out of cardboard, to represent my flattened nose from the alleyway brawl. I thanked her for it.

"I feel like a real jerk, Loretta." I said. "Why?" She asked. "Because I did not get you anything." "Oh, don't worry, Santa is bringing me plenty of presents." She said. I did not have the heart to tell her that Santa is not real, well...was real, but is now dead.

I knew that Sal hadn't gotten her anything, and I knew Maureen definitely hadn't, so I told Loretta to stay in my apartment while I go out and get us something to eat. I went downstairs and began to bang on Sal's door. I banged for a long time before anyone answered. Finally Maureen came to the door. "What do *you* want?"

She had a Santa hat on.

"Where's Sal?" I said.

"He is in the back, what do you want?"

I pushed her to the side and sifted my way through the crowd of people who were all drunk on eggnog. I saw Sal sitting in the kitchen looking miserable. He brightened up when he saw me.

"Jack!" He shouted, "You came."

"Yes," I said, "I need to ask you a question."

"What?"

“Did you buy Loretta and Christmas presents?”

He looked at me absentmindedly.

“No.” He finally said.

“Jesus Christ! What kind of father are you?” I said.

“Well, I’m Jewish, I didn’t think about it.”

“Well, she’s not Jewish, and her mother is not Jewish. Now you better get her some goddamned gifts or I will come down here and kick your ass and your fat-assed girlfriend’s too!”

I walked out.

I grabbed a few sandwiches off the table as I left Sal’s apartment and went back upstairs.

Loretta was right where I left her. “Here,” I said, “sandwiches.” She took one. The music from below was thumping. We both sat watching the walls shake.

“I have an idea,” I said.

I walked into the kitchen and got two pots and two pans and two wooden spoons. I gave her a pot and a pan and a wooden spoon. I put the pot on my head and began banging the pan with the spoon. Loretta did the same, and we began marching around the room, banging and shouting and shrieking. Louder! We were humming and dancing and stomping. We began to sing:

Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg.

How Maureen and I became lovers is a mystery to me. Loretta flew back to her mother and I wouldn't see her again for another seven-teen years. She became a very beautiful woman. Anyway, Maureen, out of nowhere, knocked on my door one evening. I was getting ready for work. When I opened the door she entered uninvited. She took a seat on the couch, the same exact spot she had sat in the night I had met her for the second time.

"You know," she said, "I've always have been an admirer of yours."

I was shocked. I thought she hated the very ground I stepped on.

"What?" I said.

"That's why I've always been so cruel to you." She said. "I was jealous of you as a writer."

"I assumed you thought of me as a misogynist." I said.

"No." She said, "You write about women very beautifully sometimes."

"All that talk about your balls and cock head looking like a German army helmet," she continued, "it's all quite a romp!"

"I didn't think women would understand my writing." I said

"Oh they do." Said Maureen AKA Ms. Janet Scott, "They do indeed."

And before I knew it we were spread-eagle in the act of love. I put her big face on top of mine and I kissed her. I kissed her softly at first and then I went in for a long one. I pulled

away and began to get undressed. She did the same, revealing to me her oddly, vase shaped body. We both were modern art masterpieces.

When it was over, she looked at me and said, “I love you. I always have loved you.” I said, “What about Sal?” and she said, “I’m done with Sal! He’s not an artist! He’s a nobody, a sad man with not one ounce of creativity in his body. Not one bone says *Magic!*”

I got out of bed and walked over to the bedroom window. I lit a cigarette and watched the streetlights change. I was late for work, but I decided to take the night off. I felt some juices flowing in my mind. I had to write, that was that. I hadn’t been with a woman since Sheila, so that was... five years without one drop of love.

Sal was happy to get rid of her. She moved her things from Sal’s place into mine, and we began living together. She had so much stuff it was unbelievable. Boxes and boxes of junk. She never threw a damn thing away, not in her whole life. My house, which was normally barren now gyrated with life. She kept the refrigerator full, since she was fat. She kept me drained; my balls were the size of acorns. We made love four or five times a day. I went to work in the nights, wrote in the morning, drank in the afternoons with Maureen, and fornicated until falling fast asleep—

Life was good.

7

For one year Maureen and I were together. I had gone from my beautiful alien of Titan to this wounded possum. Maureen and I were both wounded, and we were blissful in our agony. I once told her that she had a face of a jackal and she told me that I had the nose of a washed up prizefighter. It had everything to do with what you are willing to put up with. And despite us needing each other to lick one another's wounds we went together like lightening and copper. For a short while it just felt good having another around, filling the dead air, but soon that wasn't enough. She spent most nights away, sleeping with others, more creative, whose souls screamed more *Magic!* I was left in the cloud of unwanted creativity from the tailpipe of an old Volkswagen.

I hadn't committed myself to her fully, and when she did finally leave for good it was just simulation and retraction; the most common of all human sacrifices. Around this time is when I met Jane, who unlike Sheila did not need the make-up, the lipstick, the eyeliner etc. to look good. Her beauty was similar to a sunrise, beautiful without being able to be put into words. I felt like a lousy writer, because every time I sat down at the typer to write about her I couldn't

do her justice, of how warm she actually was.

The last night I was with Maureen we made love and I gave it too her hard.

The backboard of the bed slammed against the wall. I finished and rolled off.

“Get out.” I said.

“What?” She asked.

“I’m tired of you whoring around with god knows how many men! I’m lucky my dick doesn’t turn black!”

“You are such an asshole!” She screamed

“I want all your shit out by tomorrow!” I screamed back.

“You are a heartless man! I thought I could change you, but you are a stubborn prick! There is no love in you! There is nothing in you but hate! And you make those around you hate too!”

“You fucking whore!” I climbed out of bed.

She grabbed her clothes, began sobbing and ran out of the door—

I dressed and walked down to the mailbox. I had two bills, one electric the other a rent notice, and a letter addressed to Jack Cranick, Jr. from Jane Gillenwater.

8

Jane Rosemary Gillenwater was Jane's full name. I had given her my address the night of the poetry reading. The letter stated that she had seen me many times before at various readings I had done, but that this was the first time we had met. She wanted to see me again, if possible. The letter went on to tell me that she had broken up with her boyfriend due to him giving her urinary infections as the result of coitus. The letter ended with a kiss-print outlined in lipstick, and a doodle of Mickey Mouse wearing a swastika armband.

side note: The swastika was a symbol used by the Nazi party. The Nazi party was lead by a man named Adolf Hitler. Hitler was a failed artist. During the 1930s and 1940s he successfully committed the mass murder of over six million Jews; people like Sal Howzerwitz Jr., my Jewish neighbor. If Sal were to live in almost any part of Europe during the 1940s he could very well be a lampshade today. In 1945 World War II ended as did Hitler's stint as the world's most vicious

dictator.

I never loved Maureen, I was only fixated on her for a while. I gave her my heart to play with and she rang it dry. She gave it back deflated like an empty water kidney. Having sex with Maureen could be compared to making love to a set of cabinets. Her giant legs spread to each side, her hairy pussy looking up at me, completely empty. Her pussy was strictly for making babies and urinating. Love did not enter into it. I couldn't help but think what a crock love was. She told me she loved me, that she always had, but it still ended the way it did. You can not choose how things end, if they are happy or sad. They just end, usually abruptly and unsatisfying, and it never has anything to do with love.

9

I wouldn't see Jane for another two months. I spent those two months alone, writing to no avail. Within those two months I thought about quitting the game of writing. I was twenty-six-years-old and hadn't got a single glance from a publisher. I had been cleaning toilets for the better part of a decade and I found myself in a cold apartment, alone and depressed, clanking away at a dying creative machine all my days and nights with no victory, with no success, and that's the only thing a human really needs, success from time to time. I thought about the painters who spent their whole lives painting and never made it; they were the true artists. I suppose the only real genius lives in the depleted artist who never gives up, so I decided to hang on a little bit longer.

Prior to this I tried to commit suicide by licking my finger and sticking it into a light socket. I did not die, however I did receive a shock. I unscrewed the light bulb, turned on the switch, and stretched out my pink muscle onto my right index finger. Sal Howzerwitz Jr. heard my body slam against the floor while he was in his downstairs apartment watching the small black and white television he owned. He was the one who found me lying in a pile of my own vomit. My heart stopped beating for 78 seconds. I was dead for more than a minute. Sal rushed over to me and began thumping my chest with his hands. If it were not for Sal Howzerwitz Jr., my Jewish neighbor, I would not be alive today, and I would not be telling you this story, so you can thank him— I woke up in the hospital two days later. I had failed at failing; a peculiar feeling, for when you make up your mind to no longer go on living and you wake up again, you must re-prepare yourself for life. The onslaught of happy moments and sad moments that come in and out like a pelican, or a candle being snubbed out by the breeze. In death there was no light to greet me, no pearly gate, not even a tornado of fire. Nothing... just darkness.

After I recovered from the attempted offing of myself, I received another letter in the mail from Jane. She was going to be starring in a new play held in the world famous *Maxwell Theater*. The *Maxwell Theater* was one of the first theaters in Los Angeles and had housed some of the longest running plays, and whose name became very famous, only second to the *Globe Theater*. I once tried to get a play I had written produced and performed at the *Maxwell Theater*, but they declined—

Jane asked if I would attend her play, I replied that I would.

Outside of the small kitchen window in my apartment you could see a miniature patch of grass with a cement table and chairs. It was closed off by large walls made of cinder blocks. The drab courtyard looked Orwellian, lifeless and dense. In the morning when it was still very early, and I was getting ready for bed, and the ash from my cigarettes fell to the tile in clumps, I would watch the strands of sun creeping their way into my kitchen and onto the floor, and I watched bluejays chirp in the trees that grew wildly over the four cinder block walls, and I would read over and over again what was painted on top of the cement table, which was: "*Santhymum*"

I had no idea what it meant nor did I clutter my thoughts with what it could possibly mean. It wasn't a word in the English language, I knew this for sure, since I had read the dictionary three times. The first morning that the word appeared on the cement table was the same day as Jane's play at *Maxwell Theater*. To be able to go to the play I had to miss that night of work at *Crabapple Press*, which wasn't an issue, since I had been there so long, I had pretty much taken the place of the late John Clevermore. Even though I was only in my late twenties at the time I looked like an old man. My beard was graying along with the sides of my hair. My eyes were soggy and always yellow. My gut was big and hairy, pale with fresh pink scars from the skin expanding due to too much fat. I had big bags under my eyes, and still do. That is the problem, I never had great expectations for old age, since you only get worse as the years go on. Unlike wine, I did not age gracefully, tasting sweet and pungent, in fact I became the opposite, more sour, a bitter old man, or a withered Pino grape in winter.

11

It was finally the night of the play. I was nervous for I had only seen Jane once in person. I stopped off and had a beer to ease my nerves. Women made me very nervous. They made me come apart very easily. My exterior seemed to be a suit of armor, but the insides were nothing but crab meat. By the time I got to the *Maxwell Theater* the crowd was already filing in. I bought my ticket at the window from a beastly looking woman with bright yellow hair and a thick coat

of white make-up to cover her face. Her skin looked like cracked marble. I took the ticket and walked into the theater. I figured since I had just bought my ticket my seat would be in the nosebleeds, but I found myself in the front row, stage right.

The lights dimmed. Jane wasn't in the play until about 30 minutes in, but when she was, she entered stage right. She glanced down at me in the audience, and smiled before beginning her lines. As an actress she was very good, which I was relieved, because now I would not have to lie to her. If she was the worst actress I ever saw, I would have told her she was the best. This brings up the point of, how do you know what I'm telling you is the truth?

The answer is— you don't.

Jane had a dying scene. It was very convincing. She was on all fours, coughing and screaming until fictitiously expiring. At intermission, I stood in the lobby by myself, while the others mingled. I looked out of the giant front windows and noticed how peaceful it was outside. In front of the theater was a large cement side walk, then a hobbled road with the paint lines faded, and beyond that small houses with glowing yellow windows. I then thought about the how you don't often see birds at night. Where did they go? And before I could complete this thought, the lights flashed, on and off, on and off.

The second half of the play dragged, and when it was finally over I filed out just the way that I came in. The crowd was relentless, crammed into the lobby. There were tables with cookies and punch on them, and a mini bar in the corner. I went to the mini bar. The man behind it was a tall drink of water. He was lean like a string bean and he wore a blue fedora hat.

“Don't you know the Devil wears a blue fedora hat?” I asked him.

“Maybe I am the Devil then.” He replied.

I laughed, because I thought it was funny.

He gave me a drink. I drank it, and then the doors to the dressing room opened, and there was Jane. She did not see me, since I was behind such a thick mob. I could see her face smiling and thanking people who were congratulating her on her performance. She was getting closer to me, and without thinking, I ran out, got into my car and drove home.

I don't know why I did that—

12

I decided to disappear for a while. I got a call from an old illustrator friend of mine, Charles Mauloff. He told me to come and visit him and his new wife Deandra in San Pedro. He had illustrated some of my chapbooks in the really early days, right after Sheila. I was nineteen years old and he was twenty. The most he had done as an artist was draw cartoons for store

front windows. I hadn't even done that. The only persons who knew of me were my parents and Sheila, and now Chuck Mauloff. He and I met coincidentally outside of a "work farm" as we called it. It was a building that found jobless bums like Chuck and I positions that needed to be filled. We called it a work farm, because all the men were gathered up like cattle and then questioned and then booted out, sink or swim.

I still was the janitor at *Crabapple Press*, but I also wanted to take on a part-time job to help pay the bills. I was living on one bottle of *Coca-Cola* and two turkey breast sandwiches a day, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. I drank half the *Coca-Cola* for lunch and then finished it with the second sandwich. There was no finer taste than the last sip, and the feel of the sizzle at the bottom of my throat. Whatever money I was able to save I kept in an old trumpet case. I had sold the trumpet for 16 dollars. The case was made from black alligator skin and was lined with purple velvet. I eventually sold the case too. I sometimes think of where that alligator case has gone off to, that at this very moment it is floating around in the world somewhere.

Charlie and I began becoming acquaintances and I told him that I was a writer. He showed me his sketch book. It was very impressive stuff. He illustrated three of my poems and I included them in my first poetry chapbook.

side note: A chapbook is a small booklet of poetry released by a poet in order to sell or swap at readings.

After this we became fast friends and he spent most of his nights over my apartment. He did more drawings of my poetry that have yet to be released, but he didn't stay in Los Angeles long. Charles Mauloff soon moved away to San Francisco to join the growing movement of experimental art with big names like R. Crumb. Chuck was known as the Jackson Pollock of

comic books. He illustrated for a few more poets, and briefly worked with *Marvel Comics*, but his claim to fame was always his work in San Francisco. Some say he burned out or that he cracked up, either could have been true. His career went out like a light. It was as if he walked into the desert and no one ever saw him again, but according to his letter he was in fine health and living in San Pedro, CA.

I got into my car and drove into San Pedro. He and his wife welcomed me with open arms. He didn't look much different, always a good looking man. He was medium height and slender. Deandra, his wife was a very beautiful woman. I never fornicated with her during my stay. This was both their third marriage and they were very much in love with each other.

"Hello, old friend." He said to me.

"Hello." I said.

"This is my wife, Deandra." He bowed his hand forward and pointed at her.

She flopped her hand at me like a dead fish. I shook it. She was very tall with long brown hair. Her tan skin looked warm in the darkness. We sat up and drank together until 3am speaking of old times, of the work farm, and of Charlie's escapades in San Fran. Deandra was very kind and her laugh was infectious. Both Charlie and Deandra hadn't let the short lived celebrity of Charlie go to their heads. They laughed as common people laughed, and they spoke of real things, not only of books and music and interesting films.

We were all pretty drunk before going to bed. They brought me to the guest room, which had a bed and a desk for my typewriter. That night I fell asleep in my clothes and on top of the blankets. A ray of sun woke me. I stayed in bed until the entire room was filled with gold.

No one was in the house. I found a note on the kitchen table:

Jack, we've gone for a walk. Help yourself to whatever you want.

Charles and Deandra

I just enjoyed the morning and waited for them to return. When they did Charles asked me about my writing, and I told him that I had yet to be discovered. And in addition to not being discovered I had been getting some bad reviews from those who attended my readings. He looked at me and said something that stayed with me for some time. What he said was this: "Jack, it is very easy to write when everyone thinks it's great, but the true test of an artist is to keep going when everyone tells you that it's bad."

That afternoon we all drove over a bridge decorated in blue lights and into Long Beach. We walked around and ate at an Indian restaurant. I ordered the lamb. After that we just kept walking, getting closer and closer to the harbor. The homeless lived there in droves. I walked past them, only slightly knowing what their life had been like. I had spent a night sleeping on a sidewalk and I knew how alone one night could make you feel. One of them came up to me. "Do you have spare change, sir?" He asked me. "No, I don't." I said.

He nodded and moved on. I reached into the pockets of my trousers and felt the quarters.

Deandra was an artist, a painter, and a singer. She had many established friends. She introduced me to a Norwegian couple that had only come to America a week before. They were opinionated atheists with big blonde hairdos. We met at an art show. It was held in a small studio called *The Bizarre A-Go-Go* that smelled like dust and paint. The next evening we went out to dinner together. The Norwegian woman asked me if I was a Socialist or a Communist.

“Neither.” I said.

“What are you then?” the Norwegian man asked.

“I’m nothing.” I said, “I don’t care about anyone either way.”

“Then you’re an Objectivist.” Deandra interjected.

“No.” I said.

“But you said you don’t care about anyone.” She replied.

They were trying to categorize to me.

“I don’t care about anyone, including the people who don’t care about anyone.” I said.

“You can not define me.” I continued, “I do not care about a person because of what name they call themselves, I care about them for who they are. You can not define me because I am an artist. I am a bit of everything. I do what I want to do when I want to do it. There is no name or generation you can put me in because I renounce it. I am free.” I said.

“And is this what you write about?” asked the Norwegian man.

“Yes.” I said.

“Do you think of yourself as a sad or happy man?”

“Perhaps both. Nothing is black and white in this world. I am a gray man.” I said.

“Happy about love?” the Norwegian woman asked.

“Sometimes.” I said.

“What about writing?” Deandra asked.

I looked at her and said: “Writing is like a lost woman who has been found again, and she is screaming to you, *“Love me, love me, love me!”*”

I couldn't sleep. I just ran my fingers up and down through my chest hair and propped up my head with the other arm. I got out of bed and put on the same black sweater I always wrote in. It stunk of B.O. I went over to my typewriter and punch it for a while. Nothing came. I was constipated. Writing is similar to defecating. I went out on the front porch and smoked a cigar. It tasted very good. I felt the cool hair rolling off the ocean. I decided to go get a whore. I was lonely and horny, a terrible combination. I knew it wouldn't take long to find one, Chuck was living in the slums. I went back to my room, dressed, and walked out into the moonlight.

It didn't take more than five minutes before I found a cherry. It would be my first time with a whore. She was a little Hispanic thing. A very small tight asshole with little chicken legs and a gold, shimmering mini skirt. She wore a platinum wig. Her face wasn't bad, but beat. She saw me coming. She took one look at me and said,

"You gonna be able to afford this, Honey?" She was young, but she was experienced. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the little money I had, showed it to her.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"Do you have a place? I'm staying with friends." I said.

She began walking. I followed her. We arrived at a small shack made out of what looked like firewood. She opened the unlocked door.

"Home sweet home." she said. I took a seat on the sofa. The inside of the house looked worse than the outside. It was reminiscent of the *Sunrise Inn*. I watched her behind shake as she turned on the faucet, fiddled with a cockroach that she found squirming in the sink, and finally returning to me on the sofa with a bottle of wine. She held the bottle by the neck in one hand and two dirty classes in the other. Her lips were fat and wet with saliva and thick layers of lipstick.

Her skin was brown and soft. She poured us drinks. I drank a glass, then another. It was cheap wine. It tasted like the rat poison. I drank it down anyway. She got up and took off her platinum wig and her gold skirt. Her body was covered in bruises. Her belly was a small pouch of fat, the consistency of dough, and it was lined with long stretch marks. Maybe she had an abortion, I thought. She got on top of me and stuck her tongue in my mouth. It fluttered in and out like a hummingbird. She grinded her vagina on my crotch. My penis rose. I took my pants off. She pounced on the sofa and stuck her ass in the air. Her coarse lower back hair made a black triangle above her asshole. I moved forward, but before I did I went over to my pants and took a condom from the pocket. I hated wearing them, but I had to now that AIDS was floating around. A new disease that put an end to free love. I put it on, it fit snugly. I approached her again and dove in. It only lasted a few thrusts for I came and rolled off.

I never felt more alone than I felt that night. The sun was rising by the time I left the firewood house of my Hispanic b-girl. The air smelled like the mixture of spit and condensed breath coming out of a deflated balloon. I began walking down a sidewalk and I walked for a good three blocks before realizing I had no idea where I was. Nothing looked familiar. The streets were quiet and dead. I could see orange flashing lights from the powerplants, and I could see gallons of black smoke rising out of the beacons. I became very tired. It was the kind of tired that washed over you like a sickness. I decided to rest at a bus stop. I lied down on the bench and stretched out. It was still cool out and everything was coated in a dark blue, a haze, just before the sun was fully risen. I fell asleep on the bench for a couple of hours. By the time I woke up, the streets were busy, others were waiting for the bus, and the feeling of mid-morning hung in the air like damp clothing.

I woke on my back, stiff as a board. I felt like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I thought, maybe I had transformed into a monestrous vermin during my sleep, but I hadn't. I stood up and my arms and legs were there. Everything accounted for. I dusted off and began walking again. I had a better idea of where I was now. I took a deep breath and exhaled in coughs. I came to a crossroads, I turned left and a few streets over I found Charlie's house. He was sitting on the front porch when I came up the walk.

"Where were you?" He asked.

"Exploring." I said. He understood.

"We were worried about you," he said, "Why don't you go in a take a shower."

I did exactly that. I turned the nozzle on the hot water as far as it would go. I let the tub fill up.

The steam was rising and bouncing off the ceiling. I stripped and climbed in. I washed my penis and balls very well, scrubbing every nook and cranny, and then I just soaked. It felt good to soak.

When I came out of the bathroom Deandra had made breakfast. There were eggs over-easy, grits, toast with strawberry jam, and black coffee. I sat down and ate.

“You’ve outdone yourself.” I said. She smiled and joined us at the table. It was very pleasant eating breakfast with those two. San Pedro had been a nice getaway. I was itching to get home and write, however. I needed to be alone, in that room, with those same four walls.

I packed my few things, loaded them in the car, kissed Deandra, shook Charlie’s hand, and set off back to Los Angeles. It was only a 40 minute drive and I listened to the jazz and classical music stations. When I pulled into the courtyard where Sal and I had sat so many times, it felt like I had been away from home for years. I stuck the key in, unlocked the door and went in. Waiting for me on the floor was a letter from Jane.

I could see the confusion in her writing.

“I saw you in the audience, but then afterward you were nowhere to be found.”

She was right. I was not. I had gone home, put on the radio, Django Reinhardt filled the room. I drank a bit, wrote a few poems, and the very first one about Jane. In the stories and poems she went as Janet, which was a name I loved since childhood. Janet was the mother’s name of a friend I had in grade school. I spent the night at their home every Saturday for seven years. She was like a second mother to me. She worked as a night nurse and slept mostly in the day. She even took care of my actual mother when she had a heart attack at the age of forty-one.

I read Jane’s letter over and over again, and each time I felt more like a coward, more like a chickenshit. I decided to scrape together some money and repair my telephone which I had broken some time ago by slamming it against the wall during a drunken fit. I was writing some of my best stuff, I was on a roll, and the phone wouldn’t stop ringing. I picked it up, tore the cord from the wall and hurled it against the other wall. It fell to the floor with a *bring...bring...* Now I could only receive calls, I couldn’t make them, and when it did ring it sounded like a dying cat.

Jane had given me her telephone number the night we met. I told her I didn’t have a telephone, but she gave it to me anyway. I stuck the piece of paper in the crack of my mirror so I wouldn’t lose it. I took the telephone to the repair shop—

The repair man was a fat Bulgarian with a face like a chili pepper. A permanent grimace. His mustache looked more like a grease smear, something you would see out of a Groucho Marx film, always looking ugly and mean. He fixed the phone for 25 bucks. He told me I could pick it up the next day.

I went home and got into bed. The sheets were cold. I hadn't been in it for four days. I slept until the next morning. When I awakened, I masturbated, dressed, and went to pick up the phone.

As soon as I got home I telephoned Jane.

It only rang once. "Hello." I heard her soft and kind voice say.

"Hello, this is Jack Cranick." I said.

"Oh!" She said, half surprised, half disappointed.

"Yes, I was calling to apologize about not sticking around after your play. I was very sick."

I lied right to her ear.

"It's no problem." she said. I waited. Silence filled the empty space.

"O.K. then." I said.

"Let me ask you something." She said very quickly, almost as if she was going to ask her question no matter what my answer was.

"Yes." I said.

"Is there anything wrong with you, Jack?"

"What?" I was a bit confused.

“Is there anything wrong with you? I want to know, because I like you. I want to start seeing you, and if we fuck I want to know that you won’t fall in love with me. Every man falls in love with me.”

“I won’t.” I said.

17

I took Jane to the Iowa, the place we had met. We were with a few of her friends. As we approached the outside of the Iowa, Jane grabbed my hand and pulled close to the wall.

“Re-enactment.” She said.

I was hungry so I ordered a sandwich. Jane was going to share it. I told the woman behind the register to cut the sandwich in half. The bald bartender was not there. When we got our sandwich we sat down, just Jane and I. Her friends sat behind us. I’m assuming she brought them along so they could get a look at me; to tell her if I was good or not. I picked at the sandwich, because I was self-conscious of eating too quickly, but when I looked down Jane was polishing off her half. She ate faster than any woman I had ever known. I ordered a beer, drank it down. Jane looked straight ahead, watching two young men playing guitar on the same stage I had performed my poetry on. I studied her features. Her profile was lovely. She had very fine, pink lips, her jaw was prevalent and distinguished, her eyes carried with them the secrets of the Bermuda Triangle, and her nose was long and straight. She had a combination of chiseled and

delicate looks. My favorite part of her was her nose, although it was her least favorite. One of her nostrils was thinner than the other. I had a soft spot for it and I enjoyed putting my finger in it, and running it up and down across the outside of her nostril. Those were some of the most intimate moments I can remember with her. Jane would become very angry when I told her how beautiful her nose was, so I stopped telling her.

After the sandwich we all went outside to chit-chat. There was a small, white, plastic table, with four small, white, plastic chairs to go with it. Everyone took a seat at the table except Jane who sat Indian-style on the ground. I went over and sat at the other end of the table. For some reason I felt she didn't want me sitting next to her. She looked very alone. She glanced up at me like she wanted me to come over, but I didn't.— Through out all the foolish things I've done to Jane, that is one of the things I regret most, not sitting next to her on the ground outside of the Iowa, all those years ago.

18

Two days later there was a knock on my door at 10:30 am. It was Jane. She wore a black sweat-suit and her hair in a ponytail. She had just come from a rehearsal for a new play she was working on. She still looked radiant. This is how she acquired the nickname Plain Jane. I called her Plain Jane because she could look absolutely wonderful at her very dullest. It amazed me. I looked like shit. I wore a t-shirt that hugged my gut, and underpants with a cum stain on the crotch. We went over to the sofa in the front room and laid down. She was on her back and I was squeezed in next to her, laying longways. I kissed her, she smiled. We kissed again, then again. She ran her fingers through my hair. “You are Italian.” She said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Your hair is so greasy.”

She fingered the creases in my face. I pulled up her pants. Her legs had 3-day stubble on them.

“I have beautiful feet.” she said, “They are my finest feature.” I looked at her feet. They were nice. “I am a feet man.” I said. I reached down and touched them.

“Where is your television?” She said.

“In the bedroom.” I said, “I write out here, and I can’t have any distractions.” I pointed to the radio. “That’s the only thing I can use while writing.”

She leaned forward and kissed me again. This time I stuck my tongue in. I was a terrible kisser. I either used too much tongue or not enough. I used too much on Jane. She pulled away and mechanically put my left hand over her right breast. Her breasts were small and fit perfectly in the pit of my hand. She never wore a bra or panties so I reached under her shirt and fondled that way. Her nipple stuck between my middle and ring finger. I kissed again, then stopped. She got up and went to the bathroom.

She came back from the toilet. “Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“It’s eleven in the morning.” She said.

“Is it that late already?” I said.

“Are you a no good drunk?”

“No, I’m a very good drunk.” I said.

She sat down on the sofa again. I wrapped my arms around her very little waist and rested my head on her chest. I exhaled slowly. She put her hand on top of my head. We laid that way so long that I almost fell asleep. It felt very good. I remember wishing to myself that that moment would last a little longer than I knew it would.

Most people were vipers. Jane was a dandelion in a sea of vipers.

When Jane left that night I went over to the typewriter. I wrote all night. The radio was blaring very loud, so loud that the neighbor to my right, who I had never seen before, or heard so much as a fart out of, began banging on the wall like a madman, telling me to pipe down. I was caught up in a elegant minuet, dancing on the keys of the typewriter. I drank and smoked and screamed. The hawk of unadulterated creativity spilled from me that night. I had completely forgot about my responsibilities to *Crabapple Press*. The original managers I had been working for since the age of eight-teen were gone, and I was a nobody again. At the end of the night, I had written a thirty-six page short story. My fingers were sore from my dance. They looked beat-red. The tips of my pointer fingers began to bleed a bit.

I stared down at them...the creators. I picked up the telephone and dialed *Crabapple Press*. The clock read 7:30am.

“Crabapple.” the voice said.

“Yes, this is Jack Cranick phoning.”

“Jack! Where the hell have you been?!”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come in tonight. Emergency.”

“What kind of Emergency?”

“Mother died.” I said. This was a lie. My mother had died six years earlier.

“I’m sorry Cranick, but you can’t leave us hanging like that. This is a warning, but if you do it again, I’ll have to let you go.”

“I quit.” I said.

“What?”

“I quit.”

I hung up the phone and lit a cigar.

I pissed glory and shit lightening that night. Too long had my hands smelt of cleaning products. Too long had the liquid soap leaked into the cracks of my hands and burned. Too long had I stared down into the shit and puke of others. I went over to the short story, put it in a manilla envelope and postmarked it *Crabapple Press, 804 19th Street, Box # 6*.

20

“What will you do now?” Jane asked me. She was sitting on the sofa and I was at the typer, staring out of the window. “I don’t know.” I said, “Maybe begin a novel.”

“What will it be about?” She said.

“Don’t know.”

“What’s the title?”

“I was thinking of calling it *Santhymum*.”

“What’s that?” She asked.

“It’s a word I saw spray-painted on the picnic table out behind the yard.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know, maybe it could be anything.”

“Or nothing.” she interjected.

“Right.” I said, “It could be nothing.”

“That’s a very ironic title for your book.” She said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, no one writes about nothing better than you.”

21

I began work on *Santhymum*. Now that I had the evenings off I used the nights to write. I liked to listen to the motorists roaring around outside. They created a music. Jane and I had been going together for two months and had yet to make love. To be truthful, I am a very cold man. I’ve never been quite right in the head. Unable to love on a grand scale. People to me were a virus. I hated them, but Jane, she is warm, she is made of miniature suns. No matter how hard I tried I would never be able to tell her how much I loved the feel of her arms around me. To her it

must of seemed as though I was a lifeless body, but the truth was, I was in constant bliss, I was just unable to show her. We kissed a lot, it looked like two jackrabbits eating each other's face.

On a cold night, we climbed into bed at Jane's place. Jane had been crying. She received a letter from an old boyfriend telling her that he still was in love with her.

"You see! You SEE! No one can just move on!" she would scream. We had been drinking steadily together all night and when the tears came is was hard to watch. She had never cried in front of me before and I did not know what to do. I sat down next to her on the floor and put my arm around her. I still felt like a lifeless body holding this living, breathing, loving thing.

"It's O.K. Jane."

"Where does he get off writing letters like this to me?"

"I don't know, he's an asshole." I wanted to say, "You're with me now." but I didn't have the guts. For some reason, and I don't know why, I didn't believe in my own mind that this was real. That Jane was really mine, that I was really hers. I wouldn't open up to her, I couldn't. She had to ask me to hold her hand when we walked. I had walked next to her like strangers in a crowd. What that must of made her think, I don't know.

I stopped her from crying, kissed her forehead. We went to bed. She slept on the left and I slept on the right. In bed, I did not cuddle her. We looked at each other for a while. I could make out her eyes in the darkness. They were like sunflowers. I wanted to reach over and touch her. We looked in silence, until finally she rolled over and went to sleep.

I woke early and left while Jane was still sleeping. I got in my car. It felt good to be in there. I tried to count the dust speckles, but lost count. I sat there for a moment, exhaled noisily. I rolled down the window, letting the wind whistle through. California air had a way of leveling you. It came in through the cracked window; I left it open all the way home, on the Hollywood freeway, letting the cold air blow in my face like a dog. When I got home, I went back to bed for

three or four more hours. I had an erection, so I had to lay on my back. When I woke up again, I still had the erection only this time I was lying on my stomach and my prick was bent. I walked to the toilet, tried my best to point downward with no success—

I sat down, opened the newspaper to the classified adds. I circled a few things in red, nothing too promising. All hard working jobs, manual labor, bust your knuckles work. My father worked hard every day of his life, my brother was a doctor operating on infants hearts, and here I was almost thirty-years-old and still nothing. I decided to go down to the beer garden—

Bars usually depressed me more, but I needed a drink. It was about noon. Despite how early it was there were five or six people at the bar. I took a seat at the end. The bartender took his time getting to me, I ordered a bourbon and water, sipped it. I sniffed it, letting the fumes twist their way into my nostrils, they flared. I couldn't understand myself. I left a beautiful woman lying in a warm bed for a barstool. I was sad for so long that now that I didn't have to be, I didn't know how to feel. The cement in my heart had magically been lifted, and in a strange way I missed it.

Down at the other end of the bar was a twig-thin woman wearing a white veil on her head. She was drinking with some girlfriends. I could see them whispering and snickering out of the corner of my eye. She slipped up to me like a cobra. She wore all black, skintight pants, black top, with leather zip-up boots, everything but the perfectly white veil. She looked like a devil wearing a halo. She approached me.

“I'm spoken for.” She said.

“O.K.” I said without batting an eye at her.

“Tomorrow is my wedding day.”

“Congratulations.” I said, still staring into my glass.

“You look lonely.”

“I like being alone.”

“No one likes being alone.”

“I do.” I said.

“What do you say we go back to my place?” she said.

“I thought you said tomorrow was your wedding day.”

“I know what I said. I’m looking for one last good night.”

“And you think I can give it to you?” I said.

“Yes.” she said. I thought it over. I thought about Jane. By this point I had finished three bourbon and waters, and I was pretty gone. I may as well have been soaking in a jacuzzi of my sorrows.

“I’ve got a small prick.” I told her.

“Does it work?”

“Yes.” I said.

“Then come on.” She waved her hand similar to the way a wave crashes in. I stood and looked at her for the first time. Her oval face looked beat. She had been through Dante’s forest.

“Barkeep!” She screamed, “Bottle of whiskey for the man!”

Next thing I knew, we were coursing in her convertible automobile, laughing, singing along to the radio, and taking mouthful gulps of the watery poison. We made it to her place, which was a metal trailer on wheels. I struggled to get out of the car. By the time we made it into the trailer, the brand new bottle of whisky was empty. All that was in the trailer was a small 25" television set, a sofa (that pulled out into a bed), and a table. She threw herself on the couch.

“What’s your name, by the way?” I asked.

“What’s a name you like?” she replied.

“Sam.”

“Alright, then tonight, I’m Sam.”

I took off all my clothes. My penis dangled only a few inches from my body. My gut hung over.

I was ashamed, but too drunk to care. A large penis was something I was never blessed with.

“Your balls aren’t as hairy as I thought they’d be.” she said, “From just looking at you, I thought your balls would be hairier.” She was right in thinking this. Later on, when the artists would illustrate me, they made me look half man, half gorilla—

I suddenly had the urge to vomit. I grabbed my clothes and ran into the little bathroom only separated by a thin piece of plastic that folded like an Asian fan. I stuck my head in the toilet and vomited. Then I heard the door to the trailer open and close and a man’s voice come into the room. It was her husband-to-be. I panicked, held my breath. I saw that there was a window in the bathroom. I grabbed my clothes and jumped out of it. I fell into a thorn bush, nude. The thorns stuck into me, in my thigh, my side, and my right arm. I hardly felt it. I ran for a while, until I was out of breath and had to vomit again. Once I did that, I got dressed and started walking. The thorns were still stuck in me, only numb little jabs of pain pricked me now and again.

It must have been about three in the afternoon. I smelled a barbeque, and I could see white smoke rolling over a fence. The fence belong to a fellow poet friend of mine, Billy. Billy had fought in the war, and had gone crazy when returning. He slept on his floor with a loaded semi-automatic rifle next to his bed. His poetry wasn’t very good. He also slept in the pajamas of a dead Vietnamese he had killed. They were dirty yellow with red pinstripes, and had two bullet holes, one for the heart, and one for the gut.

Billy was having a pig roast. I went over to Billy's front door and knocked. Billy answered. He shouted when he saw me.

“JACKIE! YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

“BILL!” I shouted back. He looked me up and down, saw the blood dripped from my side.

“Jesus, what the hell happened to you?” he asked.

“Long story. I smelled the pig. Can I join you?”

“Come in! Come in!”

During the war Billy was a respected captain of a battalion, who aided in the defeat of the Vietcong in many battles. He was awarded for his insanity, but here, in Los Angeles, he was a nobody again, just a crazy old man from the jungle—

I followed Billy through the house and into the backyard. The fire was crackling healthily. The pig was turning...

side note: A pig roast was a barbeque that consisted of putting an entire pig on a spit. A pipe through its mouth and out its asshole, and letting it cook underneath an open flame.

The pig's eyes were wide open. There were Billy's grand kids running around, shooting each other with plastic guns. Billy and I caught up on old times. One thing I've noticed about crazy people is that they love to reminisce about old times when they weren't as crazy. He told me army stories. His instructor in boot-camp had made a man run three miles to a fence and back shaving with a dry razor blade, because he did not shave one morning. Another man in the camp did not shower, so everyone, including Billy scrubbed him with wire brushes. It took three buckets of water to clean up the blood. And while in the jungle he had to slit the throat of fellow American. Each night someone would be selected to watch guard over the other soldiers while

they slept. If they were to fall asleep and another soldier caught them, they were ordered to slit their throat. Billy had woken from bad dreams one night and found the man asleep—
We spoke of poetry. He told me he had given up the game of writing. Another one lost—
I drank his beer, ate his pig and left him. He hugged me good-bye, putting his silvery, barbed-wire beard against my face. I walked down the crooked walk and didn't look back until I heard the door close.

It was getting dark. I went back to the bar, sat in the same spot, ordered a bourbon and water. I was sitting there, bleeding through my clothes, thorns sticking every which way, hands quivering, and I saw my father's ghost walk in through the door. I watched him walk in, sit beside me and ask,

“Do you think you've had enough?” he said.

“No.” I said.

I looked into his face. He had in fact come back from the dead. I glanced away and glanced back, and when I glanced back my father was gone and Sal Howzerwitz Jr. had taken his place.

“Sal?” I said.

“Yes, Jack. It's Sal. I knew you'd be here. Jane is worried about you.”

“Jane?” I said.

“Yeah, she was knocking on your door all morning. Said you left.”

“Let's go.” I said.

Sal and I walked out of the bar together. I had a slight limp now. He put me in his car and drove home. Jane was sitting on the steps awaiting my return. Sal helped her carry me up the stairs.

Jane stripped me and plucked every torn from me with a tweezer.

I hollered, "OUCH!" with every pluck. She dressed the wounds and we went to bed. She fell asleep with her head on my chest.

23

During the night I woke up and felt Jane's body next to mine. I looked through the doorway and into the bathroom. I couldn't make out the figure sitting on the toilet at first, but as

my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw that it was Mother Death. She had on a black robe and hood. She slowly looked up at me and before I could see her face I fell back asleep—

The next morning Jane was already up, she was just laying drenched in the sunlight coming in through the window.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Sore.” I said. I decided not to tell her about my father or Mother Death. It was my own madness.

“Why did you leave yesterday?” she said timidly.

“I was looking for work.”

“Any luck?”

“None. There isn’t a job out there than can make full use of my genius.”

She wrapped her arms around my greasy neck.

“Any word from the publishers?”

“Just another rejection slip to add to the pile.” I pointed with a accusing finger at a neatly stacked pile of rejection slips on the amour. My short story *Blood, Spit, and Symphony Music, Dancers Without Shoes and Three Rounds at the Beer Garden* was rejected by my friends at *Crabapple Press*. My returned manuscript included a note:

Dear Mr. Cranick,

We regret to inform you that we can not accept your story.

PS: I did not know you were a writer.

“It looks like you dating a failed artist.” I said.

“Well as long as you are an artist.” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“I only sleep with artists.” she replied.

This hurt me like a pocketknife jab to the gut for some reason.

“What if I wasn’t an artist?” I asked her.

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“Well, I’ve got news for you, baby... I’m not an artist. I cleaned toilets my whole life. Now I can’t even do that. I’m a nothing. I’m a shit speckle on a horse’s ass.”

“What are you taking about?”

I got out of bed, slowly, I could hear the squealing of pain coming out of the thorn holes. She sat up in bed, propping herself up on an elbow.

“I’m talking about the reason why you don’t fuck me!” I screamed.

“What?” She kept her voice low.

“It makes sense now, the reason why we haven’t fucked is because I’m not successful enough.”

“That’s not true.”

“You’d be better off with some painter with a ponytail!”

“Why are you doing this?” She was pleading with me to stop.

“Then why? Why, if it’s not because I’m not successful?”

I became like a lion. My hair was sticking up, my beard was unkept and tangled, I was breathing heavily, panting...

“Because sleeping with you wouldn’t just be sex, it would be making love.”

I looked at her and didn’t say anything. I calmed down, tears in my eyes. I climbed into bed, put my back to her and rolled up into a little ball. She rubbed my back. I loved her.

I got a job working for a Newspaper in town as a printing engineer.

The boss was a real tight ass, Roger Himrick. He was five foot, five inches, with a bald head and thick, shaggy brown hair on the sides. He wore glasses, and a suit and tie every day of his life.

I shaved my beard for the job interview.

“Mr. Cranick.” the secretary yelled.

I was led into Himrick’s office. He sat behind a giant wooden desk. He looked like a turtle.

“Please come in, Mr. Cranick.” I took a seat.

“So, Mr. Cranick...” He said.

“Yes.” I said.

“How is it that you were a janitor for eight years?”

“Well, I cleaned up every night, but by the next night the can was always dirty again.”

“Oh, he has a sense of humor.” Himrick said to himself aloud.

“Mind if I smoke?” I asked.

“Yes. No smoking.” I put the cigarettes away.

“What makes you think you can do this job?”

“Well, Mr. Himrick, I’m good with my hands, I’m responsible, and I’d love my work.”

One out of those three things were true.

“What are your goals in life, Mr. Cranick?”

“To live in the woods, like Thoreau. Have you ever read *Walden*?”

“No.”

“You should. Opens up a whole new world... So what are you thinking? What’s the verdict?”

“You’re hired.”

Mr. Himrick did not like me from the very beginning. He only hired me because I beat him in a battle of wits. The truth about most victories is that they are the result of simple, intelligent pontificating. When looking at me you wouldn't suspect that I had any class, any manners, but I've read most the books in the Los Angeles Public Library, and I often tap into my arsenal of interesting pieces of information to make my way through dull conversations with people like Mr. Roger Himrick.

The job was simple enough. I oversaw the printing of the daily newspaper. I carried the ink tray from point A to point B. Made sure the presses were well lubricated and the paper was on the conveyor belt. The machines did most of the work. I would sit back and smoke cigarettes. I took long lunch breaks. The hours were short. I went in at 11 pm. and I was home by 2:30am. I'd come home smelling of ink, write for a while, sleep in late. It was really a good deal seeing that is paid 4 bucks an hour for basically doing nothing. I worked six days a week, had Sundays off, the Lord's day. On an average week I'd pull in eighty-seven dollars. It wasn't much, but it was enough for the time being. I lived frugally. Jane moved in with me, split expenses. She didn't have nearly the junk Maureen had. All Jane brought with her were two suitcases full of clothes. Jeans, blouses, dresses, skirts, never any bras, and never any panties. I loved it. I could reach in and grab her cunt any time I pleased. Her perky breasts always hung loose, beautiful and erect. My favorite thing she owned was this little gray number, a dress, that fit tightly around her curves. Her body was put together with grace. I got horny just looking at her. We still had yet to make love. I masturbated frequently, sometimes standing, sometimes sitting,

sometimes laying. I was usually a right-handed man, but when it came to masturbation I was ambidextrous. They say that's a sign of intelligence.

I moved the typewriter into the bedroom. Some nights we were both nude. She would be lying on the bed and I would be next to her working on the typer, dancing. In those days the apartment was very warm, very happy. I wanted to tell her than I loved her, but I didn't. I knew why so many men had fallen in love with her before. I remember looking at her through my cloudy cigar smoke while she laid nude upon my bed.

"Will you marry me, Jane?" I asked her.

She turned to look at me.

"No." she said, "But don't stop asking."

"Don't stop asking?"

"I don't want to marry you now, but that doesn't mean I don't want to marry you ever."

"O.K." I said, "I won't stop asking."

I was convinced *Santhymum* was just a made-up word, and that I would only drive myself to the madhouse if I tried to continue my search for its definition. I named the main character of the book Santhymum, pronounced San-thee-mum. The book was dead. I would sit down at the typer every night and stare at the blank white page until morning. Not a goddamned word would come. My constipation got worse. I couldn't squeeze out a word of poetry either.

I thought about putting the barrel of a gun in my mouth, do the job right this time, like a man, but then I thought about Jane having to clean up my brains, and I couldn't do that to her.

"I'm going to kill myself, Jane." I'd say.

"Why?"

"Because I can't write. Hemingway blew his brains out when he couldn't write."

"Is that how you're going to do it, a gun?"

"I don't know."

"When are you going to do it?"

"July 1st."

"Why July 1st?"

"Because that's when Ernie did it, and Louie Celine died."

"They died on the same day?"

"Yep. July 1st, 1961. Two of the world's greatest writers, worm food."

“How do you want your funeral?” she asked.

“Small. Just you. Be sure to play Benny Goodman’s *Goodbye*. Do it on a day that it rains.

Be sure to put beautiful flowers on my grave.”

“Why don’t you buy me flowers, Jack?”

“I bought flowers for a woman only once in my life. The same day we got into a fight. I left so I didn’t kill her and when I got back the flowers were in the trash can. I’ve never bought flowers for a woman since.”

“Well, I want some.”

“Alright. I’m going out to get a pack of beer, I’ll get you some.”

“Thanks Jack, love.”

I drove down to the *Giant Eagle* grocery store for the beer and the flowers. All the roses were dead. Lilies were ugly. Stargazers smelled like shit. That is when I saw the varietal *Chrysanthemum*. I took a double-take, chrys-an-the-mum. Santhymum. It was a flower. It was a large and round flower. Masculine. I felt some of my madness melt away. I now knew what my novel would be about: flowers—

I was so excited I almost forgot to pay for the booze and flowers. I could only afford one bouquet, so I bought sunflowers for Jane to match her eyes. I tore a chrysanthemum at its stem and stuffed it in my jacket pocket. I drove back to the apartment. Jane was standing in the middle of the room, in a long dress shirt of mine, staring at an empty easel. She was trying to paint my face. She got the scarred, fat face right, but the eyes were wrong. They had far too much life in them. I put the beer and flowers down on the counter, took the chrysanthemum from my pocket. It was smashed and most of the peddles had fallen off. It looked so fragile in my hand.

“What is it?” Jane asked.

“Santhymum.”

She smiled, walked back to the easel, dipped her brush in yellow paint and painted a little flower in my hair. She looked at me and winced. “You like?” she asked.

“A masterpiece, baby, a masterpiece.”

27

Roger Himrick became a bigger and bigger pain in my ass. He would watch me from his office building window while I was on my brakes to make sure I was wasn't taking longer than I should. I was getting tired of working the presses, so I went to visit Mr. Himrick one afternoon.

“Sir, I have a request.” I said.

“What is it, Cranick?”

“I don't know if you know this, but I'm a writer.”

“A writer, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“How long?”

“Too long.” I said.

“Published?” Roger enjoyed speaking to people in two words or less. He usually only responded in one word, like “Published?”

“Not yet.” I said.

“Are you writing anything now?”

“I'm twenty pages into a novel.”

“A novel, huh?” He also used the expression “Huh” quite a bit.

“Yeah.”

“What’s it about?”

“Flowers.”

“Hmmm.”

We were like two ducks quacking back and forth.

“So what do you want?” He continued.

“Well, I was wondering if I could get a position as a journalist for this newspaper. I think I would be very good at that. Writing articles and so on.”

“Do you have a college degree?” he asked.

“Highschool.”

“You need a degree in journalism to be a journalist. I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.”

“Fine. Fine.” I said, as I started to walk out.

“Oh wait, Cranick...”

I turned back.

“I do have a job for you.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve been having some trouble with rats in the basement. Go on down there and see if you can kill one of the bastards.”

He took sweet pleasure in ordering me to do that. He was the boss and I was the employee. He was the father and I was the son. He was big and I was small.

I took my break, went to the toilet and jerked off in the stall.

After that I made my way to the basement. The building was a very old building and was still heated by a coal. There were gigantic, glowing heaters pumping hot air out of small, metal slits. The room was almost pitch black, except the quivering air escaping from the boilers. I found a fire poker and grabbed it by the handle. I could hear the squealing of the rats. The squeals got louder and louder as I got further in the room. Finally, I saw one of them. It was the size of a football, a monestrous creature. I plunged the poker forward and into the side of the rat. It let out a gut wrenching, blood curtailing shriek. I picked up the poker, it was now twenty pounds heavier than before supporting the weight of the impaled rat. The carcass slid a little further down on the poker. I walked to the doorway, made my way back upstairs. I walked through the halls carrying with me my rat. Blood was running from the puncture wound all over the floors. I past the journalists floor, the editors, the publishers, through Mr. Roger Himrick's office and placed the dead rat smack-dab on his desk.

“There you are Mr. Himrick, one dead rat.”

He examined the body, blood spilling out over the desk. His face become red with anger.

“Cranick,” he said, “you're fired!”

On the drive from the newspaper manufacturer I listened to the radio. They were playing the greats back to back. Ellington. Dorsey. Armstrong. James. Goodman. Miller. Shaw. Stordahl. I thought about living in a cushy house, luxury automobiles, good cigars, fine wines, plentiful meals, steak, mashed potatoes, and gravy. I thought about long walks down never ending beaches, jacuzzi soaks, nine cats, a home in Europe. Serenades. Italian women, tight virgins, wide landscapes, breezes carrying dreams. It all seemed so far away.

I thought about poetry. Poetry was the escape. The novel is the work. The poet is never expected to succeed. They were notorious for going mad and committing suicide. They say a poet is never appreciated until after they are dead, and that's true, and most of the time they do go mad, end up homeless, jobless, mindless, and loveless. I had the advantage of being all those things early on. The only thing a poet needs is a home. They need the chair, the desk, the typer, the walls. Jobs come and go. To be a poet your mind must be spoiled. And you do not need love.

Love is the farce. Love is trivial. It is strived for, but it is not necessary. It's the steaming piles of rubble after a firebombing. Love is the mechanism for ease; it's a temporary mirage that helps you finish life. The poet only needs a home. Creativity does not live on the streets, it does not sit in bars, it does not spend the night in jail, it does not fornicate, the creator does those things; creativity comes natural, and if you got it, you got it, and if you don't, you don't.

29

I didn't go home right away. I drove to a pier, parked, and walked to the end. I rested my arms against the rail. I looked at my wristwatch, 3:30. I wouldn't get home until at least 5. Jane was already fast asleep. She slept sounder than any woman I had ever known. It was particularly dark out there. Almost completely black. I could only hear the sounds of waves crashing in. Then I heard a rustle. I looked over and there was an old Negro man on a bench, using the newspaper as a blanket.

"You scared the piss out of me." I said to him.

Between the darkness of the night and how black he was, I could only make out his figure and the whites of his eyes.

"Can I have a seat?" I asked.

"Sure. Sure." He said. Both our eyes adjusted. He had a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag.

“May I?” I asked. He motioned that I could. I did. It was sweet and sour.

“Good, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Goddamn. Yes.” I said.

“You look bad.”

“I feel bad.” I said, “You know the newspaper you were using?”

“Yeah?”

“I made it.”

“Hot damn!” he said. “Is that what you do?”

“Did. I got fired today.”

“Why did you get fired?”

“Put a rat on my boss’s desk.” He laughed at this. His laugh sounded like a hiccup.

“Now that’s a way to go, son, with stye.”

“I suppose.”

“Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t do the job anymore.”

We took turns sipping the wine. Wine gnats surrounded us.

“You look like a man who don’t take no shit.” he said.

“No more than I have to.”

“So, what is it you really do?” He lowered his head and looked into my eyes, grinned.

“I’m a failed artist.” I said.

“Ain’t no such thing as that.” he said.

“On the contrary, there’s more failed than not.”

“No. No. As long as you still breath, you an artist.”

We talked for a little while longer. His name was Willie. Willie was a trumpet player out of New Orleans, but had moved out to L.A. after his service in Vietnam. He told me was abducted by aliens shortly after arriving in town. He explained to me the things they did to him, put devices in his anus, implanted something underneath his skin and then dumped him off again. “They actually put things in my asshole.” he said. “I remember seeing pussies and assholes tacked all over the walls, peckers and balls kept in jars.”

“That’s fucked up, Willie.” I told him.

“I haven’t been able to get a hard on since.” he said. “And now they’re watching me.”

He turned his forearm towards me. I saw giant slash marks on his right arm.

“That’s where they put the tracking device.” he told me.

“Ahh, I see.” I said.

“They are just waiting for the right time to strike, that’s all. The world it going to end soon, you know. It’s been written, December 21st, 2012.”

“That’s my birthday.” I said.

It grew quiet. A few waves crashed.

“How do you sleep with all the noise?” I asked him.

“Oh no, it’s soothing to me. Like a baby on the tit.” he replied.

“Well, I gotta be going, Willie. I got a girl at home.”

“Ahh, my cat! You take good care of her, and keep an eye on your asshole, Jack.”

“O.K. I will.”

I said this as I walked away, further and further away from Willie, the blacker and blacker he became, until losing shape and disappearing all together. Only the sound of his voice remained.

“I’m serious, Jack! They’re coming! *They’re coming!*”

30

I got home while it was still dark. Jane was asleep. I stripped and climbed into the bed. I stretched out, my toes reached the cool spot in the corner of the bed, paradise. I heard Jane softly moan, mumble in her sleep. Wrapped around her wrist was a blanket from childhood. The cartoon bears that were once imprinted on the blanket were now invisible. The blanket’s overall color was now a gray, and it was torn to hell. It smelled like subtle fruits, similar to the way Jane naturally smelled. I had told her to throw it away many a time, but she couldn’t sleep without it.

“You home, babe?” she whispered.

“... Yeah.”

“Where were you?”

“Jane, I got fired tonight.”

She rolled over and put her arm across my chest.

“That’s O.K. People will notice your genius one of these days.”

Jane was the type of woman who didn’t care about money. They are rare, but they are out there.

She rather get a hand written poem than a diamond necklace. She had no objections to living the starving artist life, in fact I believe she wanted to live that life on purpose, perhaps using the logic that the harder you live the better your art will be, this is just something that comes with immaturity. The truth was neither of us knew what it really was to be starving. I always wrote on a full stomach, and Jane never felt the kind of cold to rattle your bones. Maybe that’s what the attraction was, I was the illusion of the underdog—

Jane had experimented with all sorts of drugs, she still smoked pot from time to time. I never liked the stuff, it was a brain duller. She was a very smart girl, but it caused her to be slow witted at times. I’d come home and she’d be sitting on the floor with her friends in a circle, passing around a joint. I had joined the circle once or twice, but found it moronic. I would go to the bedroom and crack open a beer. For some reason that seemed more intelligent. I’d sip it and listen to them howling in the other room, reading the Beats, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs. They loved the Beats, because there wasn’t much to comprehend, it was a spiraling free fall from the golden age of literature. The generation that wrote it was O.K. to be yourself, no matter what that meant, and I suppose I should be thanking them, for if they weren’t around I would never have been able to write the work that I did.

Every author, Beat or not, had something... Faulkner and Hemingway were drunks, Joyce was an heroin addict, Salinger kept his piss and shit in jars, Raymond Chandler drank himself to poor writing, Burroughs shot his wife in the face. There have been countless murders, suicides, deaths out of the literary world all because every one of them was a little bit mad.

But then again, don't you have to be?

When I first moved into Jane and I's apartment, I had many poet friends over. My place was the place to be. I wasn't doing much writing in those days, I was telling people I was. The more of a serious writer I became the more and more I discovered my hatred towards people. But in those days they would come by, talk poetry, drink my beer and whisky, give secluded readings, shoot up, smoke pot etc. etc.— A poet I knew was hooked on heroin and used the vein in his prick to inject.. His name was Clayton, a real Avant-garde bastard, complete with the snake skin cowboy boots, scarf, beret, the whole bit. His sexuality was unknown. I'd seen him with men and women, whichever was easier. If it was soft and moist, Clayton would put himself into it.

He invited me to a party in Santa Monica. I was just getting my name out there in the underground art community, so I decided to go. I wasn't much of a party connoisseur, I preferred drinking alone. It was something meant to be done in solitude, but there I was beside Clayton in his 1967 Galaxie 500, cruising down the Santa Monica freeway. He was like a maniac, not slowing down, passing other cars with sloppy grace, all the lights turning into long stretches of color. His music was so loud, full of Indian drum beats and feedback of guitars, glass shattering and gorillas screaming. As we reached the city a police officer pulled us over. He ran the car number and Clayton had a warrant for his arrest. The cop searched the car, Clayton became

nervous like a horrifying mongoloid, completely cut loose from normal functioning mobility. The cops found a cookie jar half full of cocaine and all the fixings for one hell of a heroin infested bash. They took me in as an accomplice.

We spent the night in jail. They put us both in a giant square cell full of other criminals. It smelled of piss and iron in there, a mixture of blood and bars. At lights out I fell right to sleep. I was not one to become flummoxed. I had realized long ago, as I failed in school, and I was in danger of not graduating, and every one told me I wouldn't amount to jack-squat, that no matter what happened, life would not slow down. It was a heartless driving force that stops for no one, so I rested easy. The next morning we made bail thanks to one of the Clayton's buddies. Clayton was ordered to stay in Santa Monica to await his trial. He might've be looking at some serious time due to how much cocaine was in the cookie jar. I was set free, I told them I was hitchhiking with Clayton and that I had no idea what was in the car.

Now I was in Santa Monica on a cold morning with nothing to do. I found the nearest bar, took a seat in a cosey booth. The bar was all made from cherry wood and it carried with it a warm quality. It felt good to just be in there, secluded from the rest of the world. My back was stiff from the metal bunk I had slept on. I had the bar all to myself for a few more hours, just the tender who spoke softly to me and cleaned glasses. I didn't order anything, I just sat. I sat in the silence, picking my thumb nail. It began to bleed. I licked it. It tasted like iron. I was especially lonely in those days, and I daydreamed about a imaginary strawberry blonde woman who would come and run her fingers through my hair. Sheila was married and dancing over the grave of the late General Joseph R. Golightly. I snuggled down in the corner of the booth and fell asleep.

I was awoken by a screaming barmaid. She was big and fat, with a once pretty face. She had come into work and thought I was a bum.

“NO BUMS SLEEPING IN MY BAR!” she screamed.

I tried to speak, but when I opened my throat nothing came.

“GET OUT YOU GODDAMNED BUM! GET A JOB!”

I tried to move but my back was so stiff.

“LEAVE OR I’M GOING TO CALL THE POLICE!”

I finally rose to my feet and ran out of there.

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I spent the rest of the day in Santa Monica perusing the city blocks. After 4 or 5 hours of walking up and down the boulevards my feet became very sore. I went to a common store,

bought a shaving kit, a toenail clipper, a pre-made sandwich with french-honey-mustard, and a pad of paper with a pen. I had some money left over, so I went into a rooming house, similar to the *Sunrise Inn*, except the woman who rented me the room was an ugly woman, with a crooked nose covered in warts. Her breasts hung down to either side of her and I thought I could smell her cunt from behind the window.

“How long you gonna be staying with us?” she asked.

“One night.” I said.

“What is your occupation?”

“Writer.”

She wasn't impressed. She looked me up and down a few times.

“12 dollar deposit. 24 dollars for the room. You get the 12 when you checkout.”

I gave her the money.

“Up the stairs, down the hall to your left, third door on the right.”

“Thank you.”

“Uh-huh.”

I went up the old wooden stairs, the creaked as I stepped. The room was no bigger than a storage room. There was a fold-out bed that was half suspended from the wall. A desk. A lamp. A window facing a brick wall. And a green velvet chair with torn arms and white stuffing coming out of them. I lowered the bed, there was a large circular stain in the middle of the bed. It was off yellow, I couldn't tell if it was blood or urine. I moved the green chair over to the desk, flicked the switch on the lamp, it was burned out. There was still enough light outside to write, so I put the pen to the paper and began. I wrote a story about Clayton and our journey to Santa Monica.

I looked at my wristwatch and remembered that the party I had come to Santa Monica to attend must have gotten underway. I ripped the story from the pad, folded it and put it in my pocket.

I took two bites out of the sandwich, got sick, vomited, cleaned myself and left the room, never to return. I went outside into the open air, sucked as much of it as I could in, exhaled. I knew I wouldn't come back to this rooming house before returning home, so I just tried to forget the 12 dollars I had lost.

I had the number of Clayton's friend who had bailed us out of jail. I hadn't spoken to Clayton since we parted ways in the morning, but if I knew Clayton, I knew that he would be at the party that night. I also knew that it was going to be full of other Avant-garde artists like him. I called his friend and he agreed to pick me up outside of the *Santa Monica National Bank*.

He was thirty-five minutes late. I got into his car and we drove to the party—

We parked and walked a ways into the house. It was a lowered entrance, and we had to walk down a flight of stairs to get to the front door. The door opened and we went in. The entire house was coated in red light. There was loud music rattling my rib cage. As we turned the corner we saw a gymnasium sized room with copious sexual acts taking place. An orgy had ensued from the drug use, it looked like a sea of arms, and legs, and ass. The smell of the room was body fluid and canned heat. There were rubber assholes that littered the floor. I tried to take it all in, but then I noticed there was a legless dwarf tonguing my feet. He was dressed in a leather outfit, wiggling, giggling, and squirming. I shouted for him to stop before running to another part of the house. His phantom limbs were kicking up in the air as I shoved him off. The image was burned into my mind. I saw an ice chest with beer. I grabbed one, drank it in a gulp, grabbed another, gulped it. I was trapped in a frenzy of sexual exploitation. At this realization a

beautiful naked woman walked into the room. Her body was so lovely that it looked like one solid machine. She swayed toward me, her eyes on mine all the time. She started to unzip my pants, but then a big, black husky came into the room. He took her away and she evaporated into thin, red air—

Through out the night the orgy broke up and turned into little factions or sexual clusters. I must have been the only one there not getting any ass. I sat and drank, tried some pills Clayton gave me. Clayton had come around after the main orgy broke up, he must of been in the midst of it. The party lasted for two days and two nights. I only remember the first night. I woke on the second morning at daybreak. Put my corduroy jacket on, brushed myself off, and headed for the door. People were sprawled all over the floors, there were rubber assholes dangling from chandeliers. The smell of the entire house was now putrid. I went to the bathroom before leaving, urinated, there were two men sleeping in the tub. I zipped up and left.

There was an awkward feeling in my jacket pocket. I felt around and found the short story I had written. I sat down on the sidewalk and reread it. I thought it was pretty good, so I went to the local post office and mailed it to *New Directions*. After that I spent the last of my money on a plate of country fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy. Mashed potatoes were my comfort food, I felt as if nothing could hurt me when eating them. Country friend steak always gave me diarrhea, but I ate it anyhow. I ordered scalding coffee and waited for the urge to hit. Sure enough, five minutes later I went to the toilet. Afterward I felt like a million bucks. I grinded my teeth at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked half dead, nothing unusual for a hangover. I looked so old, already the gray hairs began to stampede over my face. I looked bad, but I felt good. I was young and reckless, capable of doing almost anything. My asshole burned a

little, but that soon went away. I doused my face with cold water and picked the crust from my eyes. I decided to hitchhike back to L.A. Those nights in Santa Monica had been so odd, and I wouldn't write about them until now— I walked out of the bathroom and onto the open and violent street, awaiting the next move.

I slept late. 1 or 2. I had no where to be. Jane was up and dressed in one of my Lou Reed t-shirts. She was painting again. Her desperate want to be an artist depressed me. I sat up in bed and looked down at my prick. It looked horrible. The sunflowers I had bought for Jane were now in a vase. While looking at them, I remembered looking upon a field of wilted sunflowers with all their heads dangling, downward away from the sun. It was one of the most beautiful and sad things I had ever seen. I've tried so long to describe it in words with no success. But then again, I like the fact that I am the only one who knows what it looks like, and I keep it to myself, locked up and sometimes I gently pat the memory with my hand and say, "I'll keep you a secret, no body has to know..." I enjoy that.

I watched Jane painting. Her strokes were so vast, epic. Every stroke seemed like the final stroke to a masterpiece. She had the classical music station going, Brahms. I realized then how much I loved her. I've said that a person does not need love, and that's true, but it's sure nice to have it.

"Jane."

"Hmm?"

"Come over here." She put down her paint brush and walked over. I was still sitting on the bed, while she was standing in front of me. I rested my hands on her hips. She ran her fingers through the sides of my hair.

"I love you." I said. She looked at me for a long time with saying anything. Then she pushed my face into her chest and tightly hugged my head. When she released, she bent down and kissed me

on the lips. I kissed her back, again and again. We somersaulted onto the bed. She removed her shirt. Her perfect breasts hung loosely. I worked downward, kissing. I glanced down at her pussy.

It was small, pretty. Still fresh, no kids.

“Take your shirt off.” she said

“I don’t want to.”

“Take it off.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to see you.”

“Please, no.”

I took my shirt off. She had seen me shirtless before, but only for brief moments. I was ashamed of what I had done to myself. My stomach wobbled. It was massacred with stretch marks and scarring. My breasts pointed outward. The hair covered me. I looked disfigured next to her beauty. I looked down at her, defeated. She looked back and smiled. I began kissing again.

Then I penetrated. It was magic.

I fell asleep again after we made love. But when I woke, Jane was gone. She had packed her suitcases and left me. I searched around the house shouting her name, but no answer came. I knew she had left for good. I sat down on the bed and cried. I cried for a very long time, and then I got into the shower and let the water hit my face while I cried. I suppose I was hiding the tears from myself. When I was finally stopped crying, I dried myself and laid on the bathroom floor. I did not cry anymore, in fact I never cried again.

The year then was 1985— I gathered my things, a black bag that contained everything I owned. Two pairs of pants, socks, underwear, 35 pages of my novel, and my *Royal Quiet DeLuxe*. I left everything else. I went to the kitchen sink and poured out all the remaining liquor down the drain. I took one long, last drag from the vodka bottle, it burned. I looked down through the window at the cinder block walls and the word that was printed on the tabletop: *Santhymum*. I fastened my navy blue pea coat, looked around my apartment and closed the door.

I knocked on Sal Howzerwitz Jr.'s door.

“Hey, man.” he said.

“Hey, Sal.”

“How’s the little woman?”

“Gone.”

“I’m sorry, there will be others.”

“I hope not.” I said, “Listen, I’m leaving for a while.”

“Where are you going?”

“Maybe New York. I’m going to need you to watch my house while I’m gone.”

“Sure thing, Jack.”

“Goodbye, Sal.”

“Goodbye.”

I had read in a book that the rarest of all the chrysanthemum flowers was the gold *Dendranthema chrysanthemum*, so I set out to find it. I was going to be leaving Los Angeles for a while to discover the America, the flower, and the ending to my novel. I didn't know if I could find them all, but either way I needed to leave L.A. Too many bad dreams lived there—I didn't think about Jane until I got aboard the train that was going to be taking me to middle America, until I settled into my cabin, and turned out the light. I didn't know why she left, perhaps it was because I had fallen in love with her even though I promised I wouldn't, or maybe she didn't feel what she thought she was going to feel when we made love. I took out a pen and paper and wrote a note to Jane. It told her how much I hated her. I remained very quiet as I wrote it; to the outside person it would seem to be a man scribbling an ordinary note to an ordinary person. I wore pain well in the face. I never let on that I was dying on the inside. And a part of me, for some reason, and I'm not sure why, expected Jane to come walking through the cabin door and sit beside me. She never did.

I was headed to Kansas. I knew a woman there by the name of Alice Ciminero who said I could stay with her. Due to the lack of money, I was only able to afford the travel expenses, the train, one night stays in motels, meals, etc. So when I picked which cities to visit, I chose only the ones I knew I'd have a place to stay. Alice was kind woman, very easy on the eyes, lustful,

pleasant. I had met her in Los Angeles during a poetry reading. She was a very talented poetess, and I enjoyed listening to her. She had a style all her own, without being trite, overblown, and boring. We always joked, in the few letters we went each other, how poetry had become so boring, and one day her I would be recognized as being it's savior.

The train ride was also pleasant. Clean, smooth, exciting. As soon as we broke out of the California line, I felt a reprieve. Jane was now behind me, somewhere. I was half angry and half depressed. I needed to write. I was like Bruce Banner and the Incredible Hulk, whenever the mood struck, I was ravenous. Putting the pen the paper made my heart leap, I could feel the poison locked up in there leaking out. I wrote a few sentences and then I began making large swirls on the paper. I closed my eyes and let my hand go, marking up the page with giant loops, over and over again. It felt like the sadness was pouring out of my heart and onto the page. That was the lovely thing about writing, you got an unlimited amount of chances at being genius. All I had to do was open up a brand new, fresh white page and start all over again. It was a profession of true second chances.

I then wrote one of my favorite poems that I have ever written. It was simply entitled *art*:

Van Gogh
cut his ear off
for a prostitute
and she rejected it
not knowing
it would be
the most

famous

ear

to ever be

what would I

sacrifice

for art?

what would

my love

want of me?

my fingers?

I could still speak

my tongue?

I could still type

my mind?

go ahead

I wish you luck, love

A strange man then walked past my cabin. I had left the door open to let some of the warm air out. He was a tall, gray-haired, bearded, distinguished man. His had broad shoulders and a pudgy face. He walked back and forth three or four more times, before knocking on the outside of my cabin.

“May I join you, Sir?” he asked.

“...Sure.” I said. It was all very strange. He looked very familiar to me, but I couldn’t point my finger on it.

“I noticed you were writing something.” he said.

“No.” I said. “Just scribbling.”

“Ahh.” He said. His beard was very well manicured. Mine was not.

“What’s you’re name?” I asked.

“Ernest. And yours?”

“Jack Cranick.”

“Ernest Hemingway, pleasure to meet you Jack Cranick.” He reached out his hand to shake.

I paused. Looked at his hand, timidly shook it. His grip crushed the bones in my hand.

“Ernest Hemingway?” I said to myself but allowed.

“The very same one.” he said.

“*The Ernest Hemingway?*”

“I don’t know any other.” he said. “You know,” he continued, “I’m somewhat of a writer myself.”

“Oh?”

I decided to play along, see if I’d come out of this hallucination.

“Yes, I have some short stories here in my bag.” He lifted up the bag to show me. He then looked sideways at my typewriter, the *Royal Quiet DeLuxe*.

“Damn fine machine. It’s the same one I use.” He said.

“I didn’t know.” I said.

“Yes.”

I wasn’t sure if he knew he was dead or not.

“So, what were you writing?” he asked again.

“I don’t know. I’m working on a novel, but I don’t know what to write about.”

“You’ll find something.”

“Let me ask you a question, Ernie... Who do you write for?”

“Myself, of course. And someone I love. Do you have someone you love?”

“Yes.”

“Then write about them.”

“Why did you kill yourself, Ernie?” I had said it.

“Many reasons.” he replied without skipping a beat. “I couldn’t write anymore. I couldn’t go on living in a world that meant absolutely nothing.”

“Does it mean nothing?”

“Unless you make it mean something, but it’s up to you.”

We sat in silence for a moment, me and Big Ern. He looked old, but pristine. Perhaps he was in Hell and I was there with him. His sentence was to walk up and down the halls of a train, forgetting his short stories behind never to be found again for all eternity. He had given me very salty advice. I tongued the inside of my mouth. A mosquito sucked the blood of a mad dog. A woman hit her child.

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I awoke on the train and there was no one in the cabin with me. I was finally going mad. I sat back in the wooden seat and daydreamed about Jane and I bathtub shopping. We were on a grass field at night and there were little soft yellow lights that outlined the white porcelain tubs. Jane and I would walk around to each tub and she would climb in. Each tub was decorated with a golden spout. She didn’t like any of the tubs, until she got into an especially beautiful one. She wiggled down into it, her arms propped up on the edges. There were other couples who were also shopping, and they were holding hands, walking, examining the tubs. It was a very nice daydream. Oh yes, yes, yes, yes—

The train pulled into Kansas after a six day ride. My skin was oily, my breath bad. We arrived at the train station at 1:30am. Only myself and three others got off. The train was headed to Pennsylvania and would stop in Maryland, Chicago, and Cincinnati before pulling into Philadelphia. I tried to find the nearest bar, I needed a drink. I tried calling Alice from a

payphone, but there was no answer. She was probably out dancing, I'd try back. Sitting there at the bar, alone, I felt my most low. I went to toilet and tried to masturbate. I almost got there and then I lost the feeling. I put it away and returned to my stool. I drank until about 3, when the barkeep called last call. I tried Alice again, still no answer.

I walked along the road surrounded by humongous stocks of corn and wheat. After walking a mile or so in an unknown direction I found a soggy patch of wheat in the darkness and laid down in it. I fell asleep there until the next morning. A stale raindrop woke me. I sat up, saw the body shaped imprint left in the wheat. The figure seemed to be slim. I was happy with myself. I had lost some weight on the trip. My typer sat beside me. I fingered it, thought about how much trouble it had gotten me into. I recalled all the mansions I had been in belonging to other, well-to-do poets, who wrote for no other reason than they were bored. They all had high ceilings, vicious dogs, beautiful wives with perfect cans, and a butler that would bring them martinis and carry them to bed when they were too drunk to stand. They were the enemy. I thought about how flabby their writing was, how mundane. No one wants to read about someone who gets what they want all the time. They always had a bed to sleep in, always had hot food to eat, cold beer to drink, soft and moist orifices to fuck. It was just me there in that field, my typewriter unable to care for me, bring me drinks, make me ejaculate. I took the *Royal Quiet DeLuxe* out of it's case, unzipped, and tried to stick my penis into it. No use.

The sky was purple from the beginnings of thundershowers. The air crackled and popped, distant lighting stuck. A spout of rain poured down, stopped, poured down, stopped, rainbow. I saw a corner store, I went to it, gave the man Alice's address, and he gave me directions. She lived about four-teen miles away. I decided to hitchhike. I looked down the road in both

directions, there wouldn't be a car for hours. It began to rain again, but to my luck I saw a red convertible zooming towards me in the distance. I stuck my thumb out like a jerk. The red convertible slowed down then came to a screeching halt. A black man was driving. He waved for me to get in. I got in.

The black man's name was Irving Job (pronounced *Jobe*) He was a millionaire due to striking oil. He was a very old man, completely illiterate, couldn't read or write. He had lost three of his fingers on his right hand during the war in Vietnam. I told him where to take me and we set off. We talked about many things: jazz music, women, Vietnam, writing. For a man who could not read or write, he was very intelligent. He at one time lived in the bayou in Louisiana. I told him that was one of my stops in my travels. I told him about the hunt for the golden chrysanthemum.

"You tryin' to find one flower in this whole goddamned world?" he asked me.

"Yes." I said.

"Do ya think ya gonna find it?"

"No."

"Then why look?"

"Because that's what my book is about."

"Not finding the flower?"

"In a way. I'm going to write about my travels and the hunt for a rare and majestic flower."

"Well, I wish you luck, boy."

We drove in silence for a while. From the side he looked like a very noble man. A long nose and strict black eyes. I could see the face of a once young man still hanging on. The radio played

Bix Beiderbecke. The windows fogged up, but Irving didn't notice—

We pulled into Alice's driveway. I thanked Irving. He smile and drove away. I walked to the door, it was unlocked, I went in. Alice was passed out on the floor. I smacked her face until she woke up.

"Alice...Alice...Alice."

"Jack!" she shouted when she came to.

She had gained some weight. She had big, thundering thighs, and a fat ass, but she still looked wonderful, glowing. She wore a sunflower dress that fell just above her milky white calves. I could smell the booze on her. I helped her to her feet, brushed her off. We hugged, she kissed my cheek.

"It's good to see you, Jack."

"It's been a long time."

"I know!" she was very jolly. The fat suited her. "What brings you to the wild plains of Kansas?"

"Research."

"Research?"

"Yes, for a book I'm writing. It's about flowers."

"Ooooooo! What about flowers?"

"I'm trying to find the golden chrysanthemum."

"I've never heard of it."

"Well, it's O.K. We'll talk more later."

"Of course! Let me show you to your room. It's an honor having the Great Jack Cranick stay here!"

She brought me to the attic, which had a small wood ladder dangling from it, as means of coming in and out. I climbed up there. There was a desk, a bookshelf, a bed. All the essentials.

I looked at the room from wall to wall and realized for the first time that every room I had ever been was exactly the same. They all had desks, and beds, and four walls, and floors.

“Will this do, Jack?” She asked.

“It will do fine, Alice. Just fine.”

“I’ll let you get some rest. The shower is downstairs and to the left.”

“Thank you.”

She descended down the tiny latter, her ass struggling to fit through the hole in the floor.

I put my bag and typer down. There was a bottle of wine resting on the desk. I undressed, uncorked the bottle with my teeth, took a few drags, and then slid into bed. It was the first truly clean bed I had been in for years. The sheets were stiff and cold. I laid flat on my stomach and fell fast sleep, a sleep so deep there were no dreams.

I realized that my sleep schedule was so fucked up. Every time I woke it was a different time of the day. My internal clock had busted a spring. Alice knocked on the floor.

“Come in!” I shouted. She came up with a tray with eggs over-easy, white toast with grape jam, and a glass of orange juice. She rested it on the bedside table. Just a cloth covered my privates.

She sat on the bed, trying to squeeze both plump cheeks on the mattress. She took the cloth from over my privates, took my soft prick in her hand, put it in her mouth and gave it a few sucks.

I rolled over, making her stop. I looked out of the small rectangular window that gave me a view of a corn field. I heard her high heels clanking on the floor as she went back downstairs.

I wrote Sal Howzerwitz Jr. a letter. I told him I was in Kansas, that I was fat and happy and well taken care of. I received a letter back about two weeks later. It included a letter from Jane that had arrived one week after I left for Kansas. I left the letter unopened—

Alice was taking good care of me. She allowed me to read her new stuff, which was decent.

Her house was secluded and quiet in the afternoons. In the evenings Alice would drive twenty-five minutes into town to a dance club. She loved to dance. She danced for me, swishing that backside in my face. I would stay in and read or write or sleep. When Alice got home, which was

sometimes very late, she would wake me up and we'd talk all night, about poetry, about Kansas, and eventually about Jane. I was writing copiously. Two or three short stories a week. I kept them in the mail, sending them off to my old friends at *New Directions*. All my stories were returned along with a rejection slip.

Alice had come into some success since the last time I saw her. She had published in a literary journal, *Orange Blossom*, and was beginning to become a well known female poet. On her bookshelf sat a stack of dusty chapbooks I had released some years prior. I could tell she hadn't glanced at them for a while, but they were well read. While I looked over her books, I could hear Alice shouting from the kitchen as she mixed us drinks, "She sounds like a real whore!"... Alice was right, when audibly telling the story Jane seemed like I a whore, but I knew she wasn't. Even though I had unpleasant feeling towards her, I still loved her. That is something that usually takes a long while to die. It takes so much for me to love another human being that somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I would love Jane for the rest of my life, just as I still loved Sheila. The fire did not rage as it once did, but a low flame still flickers. I'm convinced that the heart is made up of small compartments that the memories of old loves live in. Growing weaker and weaker with each passing love.

Poor Alice was thinking of going into teaching as to help pay the bills while she wrote, but it was truly naive to think anyone could feed themselves (especially with her appetite) on a poet's income. Alice was a college educated woman with a Masters degree in English Literature from the university of Santa Barbra, but I knew that if she were to become a teacher her writing career would die a miserable death.

"Don't become a teacher." I told her.

“Why not?”

“You might as well put the final nail in the coffin of your life as an artist.”

“How so?”

“You’ll begin to do it for strictly financial reasons, but then it begins to become a career and you’ll never write and you’ll never publish.”

“Do ya think?”

“I know. It is an artist suicide.”

“What were you doing back in L.A.?”

“A number of things. Had to be free to write. Work too long and you become a slave.”

Everyone was searching for a reprieve, a moment out of the constant decline, just a moment, but there needs to be something that keeps you from the madness side of the genius/fool pendulum. Regular jobs for writers are just disguises to hide how incredibly insane we really are. We are the Martians walking among the normal, living, men and women. We were disfigured, or at least I felt that I was. It occurred to me on the night when I first heard Bach’s Concerto for Harpsichord in F minor, 2nd movement, that a man like me could make beauty, and I could never stop, no matter what. No matter how many rejection slips I received, or how many women would come and go, or no matter how many people misunderstood me. I couldn’t allow myself to be swallowed by that big red machine.

I took a drink from the chilled glass in my hand.

“You know, I tried to stop drinking.”

“How long did that last?”

“The car ride to the train station.”

She laughed a belly laugh. She was a very animated laugher. She slapped her knee, looked up in the air; her double chin jiggled and her stomach went in and out, in and out. Alice moved close to me on the sofa. She put her lips on mine. I turned away.

“I’m sorry.” She said.

“It’s fine.”

“I’ve always been attracted to you.”

“I just can’t.” I said.

“Is it because I’ve put on so much weight?”

“No.” I said, “I like your weight.”

She smiled, took my hand in hers, examined them.

She stretched out my hand and ran her fingers along my fingers. Due to my Italian heritage my fingers were short, pudgy, and fat. They were cut, and dented, callused, and square ended.

“You do have writer’s fingers.” she said.

Jane’s fingers were long and skinny. Her hands were always cold, but very soft. I enjoyed holding them—

That morning, before going to sleep, I wrote a story about a man in Kansas who get’s picked up by a former slave named Irving Job, who is on the run after murdering the man he worked for after finding out he raped his twelve year old sisters.

It was titled *The Wild Plains*.

Down at the post office, I dropped *The Wild Plains* into the mail slot. I kissed it and then stuffed it in. Across the way was a flower shop, I went in, sniffed around, no sign of the golden chrysanthemum. The woman behind the flower counter looked inbred. Everyone in Kansas on a gloomy day looked like walking porcelain statues. Their skin was so fine, milky, and soft. I must of looked like an outsider to them, for I was met with unsettling stares. My skin had been turned

to shoe leather from the California sun. I felt like a gargoyle, chiseled out of stone. While I was inside the store, rain began to fall in sheets. I almost felt ill. My heart was sinking low, and my stomach turned to knots. I saw an ammunition depot across the street. I buttoned my peacoat, covered my head with a newspaper and ran over to it. I had the impulse to buy a gun. I found a small black pistol. It was smaller than my hand. I purchased it, but had to wait three days before being able to take it home. Three days passed, I returned for the gun. It was a little P-shooter, the kind to make a small bullet hole, as opposed to taking off the entire head. I put it on the table in Alice's attic, thought it over, it wasn't worth it. Knowing that Alice would go nuts if she found the gun, I hid it between the box-spring and mattress.—

Some days I didn't feel like speaking and other days I was perfectly fine...friendly, affable, sweet to Alice. It was hard not to be sweet to Alice, but somehow I managed to do it. On those days she left me alone, and I would sit nude in my chair watching the crops sway back and forth in breezes. It seemed like years since I last heard music. Mother Death was pacing back and forth behind me all the time, I could feel her. She had all the time in the world...

I had noticed two bluejays perching on power lines outside of Jane's house. They were always together, side by side. They were true love birds. I enjoyed watching them. It almost seemed that truly felt love for one another. Their heads would bob in sharp, jabbing motions until their beaks would meet. One of the birds had a small patch of white feathers on its chest. They became a joy for me. You often could find beauty in the strangest of places, in the places no one ever thought to look. I connected to the lovebirds, because I too was not someone expected to love. A woman once told me that I'd never be taken seriously because my poetry was too vulgar, but what she didn't realize is that all I wrote about was love, happiness, success, victory, life, I just made the

people look harder to find it, the meaning was there like the bluejays, but I just put cigarettes out on them, and poured alcohol over them, and screamed at them, but they always remained there.

In bed I would tell Jane I loved her out loud. It made the darkness less incriminating. I felt like a bum, a failure. The next morning the bluejays were there as always, chirping, and the sight of them almost brought me to tears. I went over to the bed, took the gun from underneath the mattress, cocked it, aimed out of the window and fired. The little bird was dead before it hit the ground. The other bird had flown away at the noise of the gunfire. Moments later I heard Alice climbing up the ladder.

“Jack!”

“I’m fine, Alice.”

“I heard a gunshot.”

“I shot out of the window.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No.” And I hadn’t.

“Give me the gun, Jack.” I did as she told. She grabbed it by its grip with two fingers as if it had a horrible, rotten smell. She left the room.

I didn’t think much of killing the bird at first, but as the days went on and I saw the single bluejay sitting on the power line I began to feel miserable. I had killed its mate. It was the first thing I had ever killed. It seemed so lonesome, so sad now that its partner was dead. I believe I killed the female bird, the one with the white feathered chest, because the one that remained looked straight ahead, very masculine. He was there every day next to his phantom love. The misery I felt became too great and I couldn’t go to the window anymore, and eventually I had to

leave Alice's house. I was eroding in that attic. I needed to leave Kansas. I'd been there for four months, and I had received another letter from Sal, which enclosed another letter from Jane. I put the letter in my jacket pocket and began to pack. Packing depressed me, but it went quickly. The *Royal Quiet DeLuxe* was put back in its case, and I left in the middle of the night while Alice slept.

The rest of the night I spent at the train station. It opened promptly at 5:30am. I purchased my ticket—

“Where you headed, son?”

“New Orleans.”

The trip would take eleven days. I went to the bar car. It wasn't open yet. I returned to my cabin, took out the typer, wrestled with it for a while. Other writers were making the switch to

computers, but I couldn't do it. It was a completely different experience, fighting with each word rather than gliding gracefully across a keyboard. I believed you respected the words much more, but that's just one of my nonsense beliefs, there were 1000 better books than mine written on computers, but I felt them inferior. I returned to the bar car, took a seat. The place was musky. The car rattled. A whistle sounded.

"We're just opening up, Sir." the barkeep said, "Don't you think it's a little early?"

"It's never early to get ahead." I said, "Bloody Mary."

I took a sip, swallowed hard. I needed to clear my head. I had been drinking consecutively for the past three days, and I was just beginning to come down. Bloody Mary was good to mellow the mind.

"What do you do?" Bartenders were like barbers, they had a list full of stock questions.

"Do you really care?" I asked him.

"Sure." He said.

"Umm... I'm a dentist."

"A dentist, eh?" He looked shocked.

People loved dentists as long as they did not have to go to one. This was a time when money was more important than art. Telling a woman you were a writer or a painter to them meant you were unemployed, but a dentist, now there is a profession. In the heart of most women is a dollar sign. So I told them I was a dentist—

As the hours proceeded I ordered more and stronger drinks. In those days I believed drinking made you a better writer, but that was just an illusion. Bill Faulkner almost drank himself blind, and he'd throw away any piece of mail that wasn't a check, and I thought that's

what made him great. I was wrong, what made him great was his natural ability. I had to learn that the hard way. My body wasn't made for drinking in excessive amounts over long periods of time. When I was a boy, I would come home from school every day and our neighbor would be passed out on the driveway.

"Mom, I think he's dead." I'd say.

"Oh no!" My father would say, "That's just Phil, he's drunk."

Phil lived to be eighty-one, both legs amputated. Some people could drink their whole lives and be stronger than a cast-iron mustang, but I was soft. I'd vomit violently after every night of drinking, so when I got older I was forced to give up the drink or I would die. Now I just enjoy wine. I've become a collector, just a small gathering, Blancs and Pinot mostly—

In New Orleans I would be staying with a fellow poet and his wife. Bill La'fante. Bill was missing nearly all his teeth and was in a wheelchair, but he was one of the few poets I truly admired. I didn't take more pleasure in reading any other author's work more than Bill's. He was a very funny poet, which is a rare thing. Usually it was only about: murder; death; suicide; love loss; rape; politics, and shaved vaginas. Bill was yet another victim of the war in Vietnam, and his poetry only became political after returning to the states. Before he was shipped off, he and I vowed never to write a political poem in our lives. We knew that anyone who wrote about a tragedy or a war was bound to become famous, not because of their talent, but because of their subject. It was too easy. Bill told me he started to write about the war, because he had seen so many ugly things over there that he needed to let them out. We understood.

We had created somewhat of a poet circle; we thought of ourselves as the Fitzgeralds, and the Hemingways. Bill published a small literary magazine that he invited me to write for, and for

a short while he was my editor. If Bill was Ezra Pound, I was T.S. Eliot. All the poets in the circle would discuss our art, drink brandy, and so on... Besides William, which what he went by in those days, and myself, there were three other gentlemen in our circle. They were known as Lloyd Tabith, Raymond Redcliff, and Henry Gutenberg. Henry was the worst poet, but thought of himself as the best, Raymond only wrote about his fecal matter, and Lloyd secretly wore lady's undergarments underneath his clothing. We were a spectacular bunch.

Bill was significantly older than I was. When I was 20 he was 46. He had been chiseled by the war, and he was big and gray. He was an excellent soldier, although he was at one time a very kind man. His size was one of a professional linebacker, but he was able to handle things with great ease and carefulness. He wound up in the wheelchair after a grenade blew off his left foot, and upon his return had become a loose cannon. I recall a time walking down Hollywood and Vine with a bag of oranges going to deliver some to Bill. When I got to his apartment, Lloyd was on the ground with his pants pulled to his ankles and his lady's panties showing. Bill was in the corner of the room. Dried shit was stuck to his legs, the smell of the room was rank. There was mustard all over the walls. Bill held a pistol in his hand, pointing it at Lloyd. He was screaming at me, "Jack! Jack! Lloyd is a fag! Lloyd is a fag!"

I had no idea what to say to him. He quickly pointed the gun in my direction. Mother Death entered the room. I could see her behind Bill. We stood at a standstill, frozen in fear. Finally Bill began to cry. His face became distorted and he wept. He wept like a child, he wept like a damaged man.

Lloyd recovered only to be diagnosed with AIDS. He died one year later. Bill was put into a madhouse for a few years, but was released when it closed down in 1984. He was turned

loose upon the America. He moved down to New Orleans, resumed his life as a writer, and married a black girl named Sunset. She took care of him, feeding him, loving him. It would be great to seem him again after close to a decade. He was an old man now, and I was getting there, but it sometimes repairs the soul to see a friend.

I arrived in New Orleans around supper time. I kept to myself those eleven days. I got strange looks from the other passengers, but there were no more visits from Ernie or Mother Death. When the train would stop in some obscure city, I would get off, stretch my legs, and wonder the avenues and boulevards until I found something interesting. Still no sign of the golden chrysanthemum. I also hadn't worked anymore on the novel. I really wasn't sure how to go about looking for the flower, it was more of a preconceived notion that I journeyed upon after Jane left me. I suppose if I rummaged around the landscape enough, I would find it, along with the ending to my book. What I had so far was really like a journal, which is really what a good book is, a journal kept by the eloquent few.

I was very hungry, I hadn't eaten in close to a day. There was a small café attached to the train station. The air was thick, heavy. It was hard for me to breath at first. I became sweaty and oily. My skin became slippery and moist. My underarms felt as though there was a slick metallic alloy rubbing between them. I hadn't bathed in sometime and when I sat down I could smell my crotch odor floating upward. The B.O. seemed more frightful, more foul. The smells dissipated in the cold, however. The café was warm and inviting, glowing yellows and browns. I felt the most comfortable there than I had felt for years in my own home. The warmth hit my cheeks first and made them red. My hands were next, and then the tops of my ears. The outside was so deathly cold that walking in there was like walking into an oven. Wonderful jazz music filled the room, some piece I had never heard. I sat down, ordered a coffee. I was the only white person there, with the exception of the woman behind the counter. She was beautiful, full bodied like Marilyn, but didn't have the same glow that Marilyn did. Her hair was brown and short, resting just below her ears. Her cheeks were fat, and her ass was large and firm. It stuck out smoothing

the pink waitress outfit that covered it. She had a little white leather belt that squeezed her extra small waist. Her thighs were thick and dominating. Despite so much to her she moved with ease up and down the counter. It was as though she was strutting for the mad, walking down a runway for the cracked up and hopeless. And every man at that counter felt as though he was a the lucky one that could take her home and love her. She was not the kind of girl to fuck, she was the one to rub up against, to grab from behind and sink your face into her brown curls.

I stayed there until closing and then called Bill. He was only thirty-five minutes away. I sat outside of the café and watched through the window at the woman in the pink dress. I think her name was Maud, but I can't remember. She cleaned up, found a french-fry on one of the tables, ate it, then put on her tiny tan fur coat and locked up. It was almost pitch dark out, the last train had left for the night, and it was just her and I in the cold. She ran out to her car, high heels clanking against the pavement, and stuck the key in the door. I didn't want to scare her so I tried to remain very quiet, so maybe she wouldn't know I was there at all, but as she opened the door she saw me. I must of have looked like a creature the darkness. She looked frightened, maybe she thought I would rape her. I heard her let out a gasp, I just stayed seated and didn't say anything. I made no moments or attempts to calm her nerves. She closed the door, started up the car and drove off. It's a shame that that's how she'll remember always, even though I have such a fond memory of her. Soon after that a car pulled up with a black woman inside.

It was Sunset.

Sunset took me to Bill's house. It was a broken down, old shack, but it had Bill written all over it. There was a fire burning, I could tell from the chimney puffing smoke. Sunset veered off the main road and onto a dirt road.

"So, you Jack Cranick, the writer?" she asked.

"Yes." I said.

"Oh boy! Does Bill talk about you!"

"Really?"

"Oh yeah! Says you one of the best he know. Says you crazy."

"I'm not crazy, I'm just overworked." I said.

She smiled, three of her teeth were missing, just like Bill.

"You ever been with a black girl?" she asked, kind of glancing at me from a turned eye.

"No." I said.

"Well, if you want to be, just come to my door tonight at midnight."

"What about Bill?"

"His prick don't work no more. His foot ain't the only thing not working after the war, you know.

He said it be fine. That was the agreement, I take care of him and I get to sleep with others. Says you a fuck machine."

"I've only had sex with four women." I said.

"You want to make it five, come by and see me tonight at midnight."

"O.K. Sunset, I'll let you know."

“O.K. Baby!” She laughed.

The truth was I couldn't have sex with Sunset if I wanted to. I hadn't had an erection in 61 days. When I got into Bill's house, he was sitting in the front room facing the fireplace, looking into the flames as they flared. Sunset went over, whispered in his ear, and turned him toward me. He looked deranged, but he smiled a twisted grin and reached out his arms. I went over and hugged him.

“My boy.” he said.

“William.” I said.

“No one has called me that in years.”

He grabbed my hand and rubbed it between his, as if to warm it up. Sunset went to the mini-bar and mixed us drinks. I had a scotch and water. His typewriter was set on a thin wooden card-table. Next to it was a fresh stack of white paper. On the ground were crumpled up pieces of poetry. It looked just like his old apartment in Los Angeles. He and I caught up. We spoke for hours, he was writing an opera, and novel, and a play. None of them were ever to be completed. I would say some of the world's greatest writing lived in the unfinished projects of wonderful writers. Even though his writings were all political they still had that same power Bill's work always had. He read me a few of his new works, trying to clear his throat, struggling to pronounce certain words due to his lack of teeth. They were horrifying and dark. Some people called us dark, but we really weren't; we were realistic. When my parents read my work they thought I should have been hospitalized, they thought I was disturbed, a suicidal. I wasn't, I was just too realistic for my age. When a child speaks the truth it is scrutinized, made to be a

disability. But when the happy memories fade, and the humorous anecdotes run dry, and the outrageous sex stories are all told, a writer must return to truth.

Bill had another man staying with him named Jerry Small. Jerry was a well read being. He did not have a woman or a dream. Loveless and dreamless, and to the outside person he seemed to be completely content with things such as they were, but he was a deeply unhappy person. You could see his joyless self slinking around underneath a well manicured exterior. He was very quiet at times, but very funny. Full of witticisms, boastful attempts at being clever, which more times than not seemed forced. He did not do art, although he enjoyed it. For a short while he wanted to be in politics, but upon meeting Bill, had decided against it. And in contrast to having a very slender body, his skin was a pasty, dough-like organ.

He and I hit off very well. We spoke of films, books, music. He was very well educated. Even smarter than myself at times. Excellent speller, but a bit mad. Jerry enjoyed getting into long discussions and arguments about subjects he truly did not support, although he made it seem that they were the things he based his entire life upon. I remember once getting into an argument with him about whether or not Charles Manson was a genius.

side note: Charles Manson was convicted and sentenced to prison for organizing a group of people who supposedly committed crimes against celebrities, and for carving a swastika symbol (see pg.# 22) into his forehead.

Jerry argued that he was a genius.

Jerry and I spoke about Jane. I told him everything. I would complain to him, and most of our conversations ended up being about her. He never had much advice for me, but he was someone to talk to. *Santhymum* began its slow, inevitable decline. I was 60 pages in. The curse. Another one goes. I thought it still had some life in it, I still hadn't found the golden chrysanthemum, so I held out some hope. In the meantime I wrote a collection of short stories, chronicling a character named Eliot Hug-English. The story titles included: *My Year in Los Angeles*, *Red Raspberries*, *A Summer's Romance*, *The Silent Orgasm*, *Haute Monde*, *The B-Girl*, *Hard Boiled Eggs*, and 69. Some of which, including *Hard Boiled Eggs* and *The Silent Orgasm* gained critical acclaim as apart of an anthology of my early work titled *Quitting Time*.

At that time in New Orleans, I took the stories to Bill and he self-published them along with some poems into a small collection titled *Criticisms, Witticisms, & More*. It was my first bound book. I had reach the first level, I was published, but not in the way I ultimately wanted. It was a start, and it was exciting to see my name in print on a book. I took it around to readings. I also began doing them again. The readings in New Orleans were much different than in Los Angeles. In L.A. the people were pompous, usually a person who put on a beret and a scarf and played the role of a poet for the night, but here were musicians: banjo, harmonica, guitar, trumpet, clarinet, saxophone, and trombone players that lived and breathed their art. It was refreshing and intimidating. Most of them liked what I had to say. The shouted, and clapped...

laughed, and farted when they heard something they liked. The rooms were always filled to the brim with cigarette and cigar smoke. It poured out of the cracks in the walls. Everyone was dismal looking, sweaty and on edge. Everything was made of wood and cracked as you rocked back and forth it in. It hardened the soft boys of this game. Poetry was a gamble just as dogs and horses were a gamble, just as Las Vegas was a gamble, poetry was a living, breathing thing that took risk to create glory.

The little room I was given in Bill's house was hotter than Hell's waiting room. The combination between hot, dust filled air, and the humid, dank winds that blew outdoors, made it so that I could barely catch my breath after walking from the crapper to the typer. I moved my writing desk over to the window and opened it. The air leaked in and cooled me down. It felt so good to write while feeling that cold air surround you. Each night, I fought with the typer, and most of the time I won. Nude women with big breasts and 3-inch nipples would strut along my bedside, swishing side to side their ass, allowing me to fall asleep feeling as though I had done something.

It was third week in New Orleans. I went down Bourbon St. Watched all the people dressed in costume, parading about. Women were showing their tits for necklaces. I stood off to the side watching the chaos with my hands in my pockets. Masked men twirling batons, children and animals walking as one, black, white, godless, god-fearing, freaks, lovers, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, walked together, laughing, and shouting, and dancing. It was amazing to me that so much life could be happening in one place while in Kansas I would be watching the crops sway back and forth in almost perfect darkness. A man could think he were dead if he were to become lost in one of those fields— Watching them... I felt happy.

The unopened letter from Jane rested on the table in my room. I looked at it, rubbed it with my thumbs, feeling the paper, reading her name, then my name, then both. Her hand writing looked like a child's. I thought about opening it, but then stuffed it in my pocket. I was meeting Jerry to go to the cinema. Everything was shit. In my opinion they hadn't made a good film since Stanley Kubrick's 1964 masterpiece *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. My favorite film. But Jerry dragged me there. I don't remember what film it was, but I remember not liking it. After the show we got something to eat. Jerry had begun to write short stories because he saw me doing it, so he thought he could do it too. We talked about writing. We talked about Jane, naturally. Jerry began to argue with me for pleasure, but I was in no mood.

"You should move on. Fuck her." he said.

"I can't." I said.

"Did you love her?"

"Yes."

"There's your problem. Love is for fools." In reality Jerry needed love more than anyone.

“You’re fucked up, man. You haven’t listened to one word I’ve said.”

And despite the fact that Jerry loved to argue, he hated being disagreed with.

“No, what’s fucked up is you crying to me about Jane every time I see you.”

A shred of truthfulness came beaming through.

“Why don’t you speak to me when you have something worth listening to.” I said.

“I don’t think I’ll ever have anything worth listening to, since you’re a *self-published* author and all.” he replied, in his famous, sarcastic, chickenshit way. I knew that if I kept talking I would smash his face in, so I smiled a toothy smile. His continued to look at me blankly. When he was being condescending the tone in his voice changed to a very matter-of-fact, self-righteous sound.

“I mean, you’re more fucked up than Bill.” he continued.

“What?” I asked.

“Your idealist notions sicken me. How you want to be published and want to get Jane back, but you can’t do any of that. You’re nothing.”

“I’m a failed writer. I’m a failed lover. I’m a fat man; a sad man; a hairy man; I have a small prick; I don’t know the first thing about women; I’ve seen and enjoyed most perverted pornography; I drink too much; I drink too little; I smell; I don’t know everything; I have bad breath; my writing resembles my favorite writers, because I idolize them; I’ve never read anything by Tolstoy... What else is there? Even with all my flaws I’ll write with more power and more conviction than you’ll ever know.”

I had bequeathed every insecurity I had to him.

I rested my hand on his shoulder, he looked up at me feeling as though he had won our verbal chess match, and I left him sitting alone in the dinner. As I walked away he kept eating and never turned around. He had betrayed a friend so quickly. It was disappointing to see a smart man lost in immaturity. He hadn't found himself yet. He had become nothing without realizing it—

I packed a my few things, kissed Sunset, hugged and kissed Bill and departed. I wouldn't return to New Orleans again for another 5 years, to watch Bill die—

I was a pallbearer at his funeral.